The Innocence of G. K. Chesterton

by

Gerald Bullett

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BY

GERALD BULLETT

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PREFATORY NOTE

ON CRITICISM FOR ART'S SAKE

This little essay on a great controversialist appears at a time when controversy is not much in vogue, and I cannot help foreseeing one grave objection that will be urged against the general scheme of the thing. It will be voiced by the critic who assumes an air of elegant ennui when anything is discussed that cannot be reduced to his favourite formula, 'Art for art's sake.' I imagine him saying: 'This will never do. We are not concerned with Chesterton's views on this or that: above all we are not concerned with the rightness or wrongness of those views. We are concerned only with his manner of presenting them. We are interested in the way he wears his hat, but not in the contents of the head upon which he wears it. Do not bore me by repeating or refuting what he says; do not sicken me by

describing what he does; let me reserve my energy for the aesthetic thrill of hearing how he says or does it.'

In the friendliest spirit I recommend this critic to visit his barber and to say: 'It does not matter whether you cut my hair or my throat so long as you do it elegantly and with art.' I cherish the hope that the barber may take him at his word and do both.

G. B.

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I THE SWORD OF LAUGHTER

FORTY seven years have passed since Gilbert Keith Chesterton conferred his first benefaction upon mankind, that of allowing himself to be born; and for the last two or three decades our little literary world has echoed with the sound of his battles. It is certainly time that he was put in his place. No one is more conscious than I that to attempt to put him in his place is to ride for a fall, and no one is more conscious than Mr Chesterton that to ride for a fall is better than to sit with folded arms awaiting the judgment of that shadowy and monstrous prig, Posterity. I use the word prig with the natural spleen of the amateur critic in the presence of his infallible pontiff. Posterity is the court against which there is no appeal and in whose name all positive verdicts on contemporary literature are set timidly aside. Posterity is the god of

those pedants who would die (and may it be soon) rather than make a mistake. Like more popular gods, it is held to be all-wise, omnipotent; like them, it is used as a deterrent for the timid and as a rod for the rash. And the resemblance of the god Posterity to these other gods does not end here; for it suffers, as they do, from the minor disadvantage of not yet (to our knowledge) existing. At the present moment, in a very literal sense, we are posterity, or, to speak more accurately, we are the custodians of posterity; and, being so, we may be excused for regarding as premature this worship of what our charge may possibly become, if he is given the chance. Not the most ardent reformer of prisons has ever demanded that gaolors should pray to their prisoners, or sing to them propitiatory psalms night and morning. Posterity does not yet exist, and never will exist unless we continue to leap before we look, unless we continue to engage in enterprises whose danger and romantic

folly are infinitely more alarming than the danger and romantic folly of writing such a book as this.

I am provoked into making this rash attempt at contemporary criticism by the startling solitariness of Mr Chesterton in our literature. He fits into no pigeon-hole ; he belongs to no school. He is one of the few living wits who love both feasting and fighting, one of the few who would not be utterly dwarfed if they found themselves among a group of Elizabethan worthies in the Mermaid Tavern. His gargantuan appetite for life has found expression in a literary exuberance that blazes like a beacon in the twilight of our times. The technical apparatus by which he communicates his zest is an apparatus of his own invention which no other writer could use without being instantly detected in imitation or parody (there is a little of both in this chapter). His style may be good or bad (indeed it is both) ; but certainly it is his own. And whether he writes essays,

literary criticism, novels, detective stories, poems, or a play, his accent is unmistakeable. He will pitch his tone a little higher, in verse, or a little lower, in controversy ; but the voice will always be his. And if it is true that he loves feasting and fighting, it is also true, and vital to his quality, that he is able to indulge both passions at once. He rides to battle with joy, as to a feast : he enters a banquet hall, as he would have entered the lists at Camelot, sternly resolved to quit himself like a man and win new glory for the banner of his house. This is the impression that his writing makes on those who read him gladly. Not everyone reads him gladly. There are some who resent what they call his verbal jugglery, and not only the merely dull people. The merely dull needs must hate the highest when they see it, the highest of spirits, the nimblest of wits. To most people who cry out against cleverness there is an obvious and adequate retort—Sour grapes. But

when all allowance is made for stupidity there remains a legitimate grievance against Mr Chesterton's manner of writing. Exuberance is, of all his temperamental gifts, the one that marks him off from his fellows; but though this exuberance is the winged steed upon which he can soar to the level of poetry it must not be ridden too far or too fast or it becomes short-winded. When that happens, while continuing to step out with all the old pride and enthusiasm, it makes but slow progress: the wings beat in vain, and the feet paw the ground without profit; for, after all, to kick up a dust, even though it be gold dust, is hardly the prime function of literature. To speak more plainly, there are times when Mr Chesterton seems to be the dupe of his own tricks, servant of the style that should be a passive instrument in his hands. The recurring antithesis, inlaid with paradox, begins then to resemble a mechanical pattern superimposed upon his thought, and so

limiting rather than expressing it. His thousand and one paradoxes conspire against him by creating an effect that is itself a paradox—the paradox that his prose style is at once brilliant and tedious. It has many particular merits, but its general fault is its lack of chiaroscuro: it shines with so long strong a light that the eyes become dazzled and the mind fatigued. The machine-gun rattle of verbal tricks ends by jading the attention that it has first intrigued. It is as if he will not trust us to listen to him unless he keeps up a running patter of puns and pleasantries, with the inevitable result that we weary of puns and pleasantries. He is a living embodiment of the proverb that one can have too much of a good thing. One can even have too much of so very good a thing as Mr Chesterton's high jinks. One can have too much of the sugar with which he coats his pills; for to wrap them up so warmly as he sometimes does is to render them more sickly than medicinal.

Another of his tricks, born like the first of an excess of verbal facility, is the trick of repetition. This is partly due, perhaps, to his wholesome democratic desire to be understood at any price by the most slowminded of his readers. He not only hits the nail on the head: he goes on hammering, in a frenzy of argumentative zeal, long after the nail is driven home. And he hits not only the nail on the head: it seems at times as if he were hitting the reader on the head, like a harassed schoolmaster bullying a dull boy. In fine, he does precisely what I have been doing in the latter part of this paragraph.

I have dwelt at perhaps unseemly length upon the defects of Chesterton's style, because only by understanding them can we understand the irritation he causes even to readers intelligent enough to appreciate his cleverness. Like nearly all poets, great and little, he uses the language of exuberance in season and out, as if impelled thereto by force of habit. If the divine

afflatus fails to possess him he resorts too readily to verbal inflation, and with as little success as the frog in the fable who aspired to compete with the ox. When he submits to the discipline of verse, these disasters seldom occur; and his verse is, for this reason and for others, not the idle diversion of a busy journalist, but the sublimation of his journalism. Much of his verse does succeed in being journalism without ceasing to be poetry, for he is always in contact, and generally in conflict, with the spirit of the age. Hating many of the characteristic qualities of that spirit, he began his career by leaping into the van of the modern movement, whatever that may be, in order to unseat the driver and turn the horse's head in the direction of the Middle Ages. In that attempt he has been engaged ever since without the slightest loss of dignity. Combined with his intellectual nimbleness is a kind of high innocence that makes him able to write in the grand, heroic manner without ever becoming ridiculous. The

performance of certain other poets should shew how rare an achievement that has become, and what grave risks they take who attempt it. Many moderns are content to shirk the risk by writing, not poems, in any but a pedantic sense, but harmless little essays rendered in flat, conversational verse that cannot stir the emotions of the most sensitive. Mr Chesterton is conscious of no risks, nor are we as we read him, because he is so undeniably in earnest. To say this is directly to contradict that popular misconception which impugns his sincerity. His epigrams are brilliant, if you will, but they have not the cold brilliance of the trickster, the cold brilliance of the intellectual antic. Compared, for example, with the brilliance, the frigid frivolity, of Oscar Wilde, Mr Chesterton's is rather the cosy brilliance of logs blazing on an open hearth. There is warmth as well as light. He has been accused, only less frequently than Mr Bernard Shaw and

with as much truth, of being a purveyor of literary fireworks and nothing more. Mr Joseph MacCabe urged something like this against him. 'The ballets of the Alhambra and the fireworks of the Crystal Palace and Mr Chesterton's *Daily News* articles have their place in life.' 'I wish,' remarked Chesterton, 'that my articles had as noble a place as either of the other two things mentioned.' Extravagances and flourishes he has committed in plenty, but a general accusation of insincerity could come only from the extremely foolish or the extremely acrimonious. To the plain man of the right wing Shaw is a poseur; to the plain man of the left wing Chesterton is a tumbler. One can imagine with what delight Mr Chesterton, seeing the chance of a pun, would hasten to reply that nothing would content him more than to be a tumbler in more senses than one, provided there was always good ale enough to fill him. It would indeed appear that a man can only escape the charge of

affectation by being dull: which means that for a man not naturally dull the only way to escape the charge of affectation is by being affected. The mistake arises out of the very silly and superficial idea that sincerity and solemnity always go together. It would be much truer to say that they never go together, and it would be quite true to say that they never go far together. The man who can take himself seriously, with never a lapse into lucid intervals, is that most dangerous of monsters, a human being without humour. Your prig is always solemn and seldom sincere, if sincerity is, as I believe, not to be divorced from spontaneity. A serious demeanour may be respectable, but it is idle to contend that it is not artificial. If, having a taste for the morbid, you wish to observe the phenomenon, where do you seek it? You seek it, and find it, in places where, for one purpose or another, men are acting a part, performing a ritual, studiously

concealing their nature. You find it in the dull ritual of commercial competition, in the splendid ritual of religion, and in the odious ritual of the criminal courts. The judge who condemns you to death will be as solemn as you could wish: he will adopt the most preposterous and cruel of all poses, judicial dignity. And the gentleman who reads the burial service over you while you stand on the scaffold —you need fear no flippancy from him. He has never made a joke; he has never even seen one. 'Dignity *is* impudence.' wrote John Davidson; and one may add that, for the most part, it is impudence in a very cheap and nasty form. Hear Chesterton himself on the matter:

> It is so easy to be solemn; it is so hard to be frivolous. Let any honest reader shut his eyes for a few moments, and approaching the secret tribunal of his soul, ask himself whether he would really rather be asked in the next two hours to write the front page of *The Times*, which is full of long leading articles, or the front page of *Tit-Bits*, which is full of short jokes. If the reader is the fine conscientious

> fellow I take him for, he will at once reply that he would rather on the spur of the moment write ten *Times* articles than one *Tit-Bits* joke. Responsibility, a heavy and cautious responsibility of speech, is the easiest thing in the world; anybody can do it. That is why so many tired, elderly, and wealthy men go in for politics. They are responsible, because they have not the strength of mind left to be irresponsible.*

Elsewhere he has summed up the matter in one perfect epigram: 'Satan fell by the force of gravity.'

Chesterton is sometimes referred to, in publishers' announcements and the like, as our laughing philosopher; and by an odd freak of chance the phrase is one that fits him like a glove. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that it fits him like a cap, a jester's cap, and that he wears it like a crown. Sad unhumorous souls cavil because, even in matters of life or death, he will not be serious—it is as if one were to complain of a doctor who is trying to save his patient from death

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that he will not be stupid. Chesterton flings his jokes about in the heat of battle, as well as in more holiday moods, because they are jagged jokes that will scatter his enemies, especially those of his enemies who are under the mistaken impression that they are his friends. He flings them as gaily and as fiercely as he would (and perhaps will) fling bombs in the Battle of Armageddon, knowing that the explosion will help to rid the world of wasters. If this is judged to be levity in him, one can but retort, in the words of Elizabeth Barrett, that the levity is in the judgment only. The laughter of fools may be like the crackling of thorns under a pot, but laughter at fools is a joy that is also a duty. Mr Chesterton follows a fine literary tradition in using laughter as a cleansing sword swift and lethal as lightning. For wickedness thrives on solemn denunciation, whereas ridicule, given time, will wither it. All the pulpit sermons in the world avail less than would half a hundred

books—did they but exist—of the quality of *Gulliver's Travels*. Cant must be brazen indeed if it survive the savage laughter of Chesterton's satirical poems. As for sin, let us call it folly and have done with it, for until we call it folly we never shall have done with it. The conception of sin flatters us grossly. There is something grandiose in it that cannot but appeal to the child in every man. That we infinitesimal creatures scrambling like ants over the face of this minor planet in pursuit of our little personal aims—that we have it in our power to affront the majesty of the universe is a most preposterous, delightful fancy. Sin has only to be conceived in the grand style to become invested with irresistible glamour. Milton's admirable Devil is notoriously the hero of his epic, compared with whom Adam is a stick, and God a logic-chopping, hair-splitting, and quite unconvincing debater. Even Marlowe's Tamburlaine would evoke our admiration did he not so often topple from the peaks

of gorgeous rhetoric into a slough of bombast and become a muddied figure of fun. And the famous lines in *Pippa Passes*:

> I crown you
> My great white queen, my spirit's arbitress,
> Magnificent in sin—

are more convincing than the subsequent fine speeches to the effect that virtue is better than vice. With so splendid a gesture in the mind's eye, one is apt to dismiss Sebald's taunt:

> Go, get your clothes on—dress those shoulders,

as the remark of a vulgarian. Not so does a gentleman, however deep his contrition, discard a woman he has loved, however illicitly.

The idea of sin survives with a marvellous persistence. Perhaps it is its extreme age that makes Mr Chesterton cling to it. No other manufactured article has worn so well. It arose, we are told, innumerable ages ago, as a system of tabu devised for social purposes by the wise men of the tribe

and imposed on the herd as a religious code; and that is what, to this day, it has remained. The admirable fraud practised, consciously or unconsciously, by the medicine men in the Palæolithic Age still dominates that popular imagination which Mr Chesterton is always eager to defend. For centuries the Church has had the support of religious sceptics because they believed her to be invaluable as a moral nurse for juvenile intelligences. We tell the child that father will be angry if he steals the sugar; we tell the undeveloped adult that God will bake him eternally if he does this, that, or the other. And the method serves. It serves, but it has its dangers, the most obvious of which is that by investing misdemeanour with theological significance, by elevating folly to the dignified status of sin, we make it attractive to all people with more spirit than intelligence. Perhaps it is necessary for truth to have many disguises in order that she may be all things to all men. When the

rationalist, that irritating fellow, remarks in his cool way that sin is only a fancy name for the pursuit of happiness in wrong directions, that the most dastardly crime is in the same category as a mistake in arithmetic, that moral values are aesthetic values in ecclesiastical dress, and that the Devil, if he existed, would be merely the silliest of all fools—when the rationalist pronounces these neglected platitudes he convinces only the like-minded: the most of mankind continue to cling to the flattering delusion that playing chess on Sunday is a Satanic rite that makes all the angels blanch, and sets the Almighty trembling with ill-temper. That little things please little minds is a half-truth; for big things exercise over little minds an absolute domination. And here an illustration I have already used may be used again. The ass who commits a series of murders is not alone in his belief that he is a tremendous fellow: Church and State, the Press and the public, conspire to confirm him in it.

The judge who, with pontifical awesomeness, assumes the black cap to pronounce sentence of death, the crowds gluttonous of sensation who watch that pitiful mummery—all contrive to believe, and to make the prisoner believe, that it is a sublime if dreadful moment, and that—fantastic thought!—they are enacting a scene of justice. Convince them that capital punishment is no more than the sanitary amputation from the body of society of a diseased (and therefore dangerous) limb, and it would lose its horrific glamour. It would become as distasteful to the imagination as any other piece of surgery. In this matter Chesterton's practice is, I think, sounder than his preaching. He believes in the theological idea of sin, as a violation of a mystical standard; but whenever he finds occasion to castigate cads, he castigates them not only with anger, but with a kind of savage mirth. He makes them feel small, when solemn cautionary finger-wagging would only

make them feel big. His treatment of pompous humbugs could not be more effective. A certain Mr Smith once described the Welsh Disestablishment Bill as ' a bill which has shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe.' Mr Chesterton set us all laughing at the poor fellow by writing this :

Are they clinging to their crosses,
F. E. Smith,
Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses,
Are they, Smith ?
Do they, fasting, tramping, bleeding,
Wait the news from this our city ?
Groaning ' That's the Second Reading ! '
Hissing ' There is still Committee ! '
If the voice of Cecil falters,
If McKenna's point has pith,
Do they tremble for their altars ?
Do they, Smith ?

And here, to return to my earlier point, is a capital example of solemnity versus sincerity. No one can have so mean an opinion of the intelligence of the gentleman who is now Lord Birkenhead as to suppose that he believed that solemn tomfoolery ;

and no one can doubt the sincerity of Chesterton's scorn. And yet mankind persists in heaping honours on the pompous poseur and in looking more or less askance at the frivolous crusader. One recalls the fine outburst of Mr Wells, delivered through the mouth of his Richard Remington: 'The broadening of human thought is a slow and complex process. We do go on, we do get on. But when one thinks that people are living and dying now, quarrelling and sulking, misled and misunderstanding, vaguely fearful, condemning and thwarting one another in the close darknesses of these narrow cults—Oh God! one wants a gale out of Heaven, one wants a great wind from the sea!' Chesterton's mirth is like a gale out of Heaven, a cleansing wind, a hurricane of humorous commonsense. Like everyone else he has his moments of levity, and these moments have their place in his writings. But his dominant mood is one not of levity but of gaiety. It is at once the genial gaiety of

the reveller and the terrible gaiety of one who rides gladly to battle.

There is peculiar irony in the popular distrust of this splendid mirth, for Mr Chesterton, far from being himself a plain man, is yet the plain man's apologist. Less obviously but perhaps no less truly than Walt Whitman, he is, even in his prose, the poet of democracy. He hymns the instinctive loves and hates of ordinary people; presents his prejudices as considered opinions, and exhibits amazing ingenuity in inventing arguments to support them. He is the most vigorous of visionaries, the most agile of giants. His literary life is an untiring crusade against the major modern heresies, a crusade that threatens every moment to become a charade. Some of the fantastic romances, indeed, read like the libretti of long charades spelling short words. Often there is more mummery than meaning, but that is not to say, as some have said, that there is no meaning at all. If you sit the performance

through, you will take something away, if it be only an epigram. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, for example, is a huge joke embodying a small allegory; and *Manalive*, that delightful frolic, exists to shew that the romance of the familiar is more powerful than the romance of the exotic, that the great adventure of setting forth is worth while chiefly because it is an indispensable preliminary to the greater adventure of coming home. These books are expanded epigrams, and the epigrams under close scrutiny are seen to be gigantic truisms that lie under every man's nose and are therefore, like his moustache, out of sight.

Mr Chesterton has this in common with Dickens, the subject of his best literary criticism: that if all his writings were bound up together they would form one enormous and versatile but homogeneous book. Of that huge book, which would be as sparkling as champagne and as satisfying as a solid meal, the finest literary

element would be the element of poetry, the poetry that lives in his verse and flashes intermittently through his prose. The poet that lurks in him is never for long silent ; the poetry that he utters is of a kind not much in vogue. It is not 'the horns of Elfland faintly blowing,' charming us into pretty dreams : it is rather a loud though musical alarum clock urging us to get up. It does not invite us to lounge on beds of asphodel : it calls upon us, in the tones of the old heroic minstrelsy, to remember ancient glories and to defend our national and spiritual heritage. In verse it falls naturally into the singing, stirring metres that in less skilful hands so readily become mere jingles. In prose, it finds voice in imagery that is militant, but never, in the modern sense, military. The instruments of modern carnage do not appear : it is the sword and the lance, the weapons of old chivalry, that bring their brightness and vigour to his writing. The banner of Saint George, not the flag of Empire,

flutters there. At its best there is a ring in his utterance that is almost Biblical. It becomes full, for a moment, of the clash of clean fighting, the splendour of tournaments: his phrases flash and ring like swords upon a shield. In these words he closes his study of George Bernard Shaw: 'But this shall be written of our time: that when the spirit who denies besieged the last citadel, blaspheming life itself, there were some—there was one especially whose voice was heard and whose spear was never broken.' And the quality that enables him to write like this without incongruity is the quality that, for want of a better term, I have called high innocence. It is this that wins assent even when he is led by an ecstasy of anger into extravagance. Here is an example. The Chief Constable had issued a statement to the effect that carol singing in the streets by children was not only illegal but injurious, morally and physically, and had appealed to the public to discourage

the practice. Mr Chesterton's comment, which began with an ironic, 'God rest you merry gentlemen,' took the form of three stanzas. I quote the last:

> So, when the song of children ceased
> And Herod was obeyed,
> In his high hall Corinthian
> With purple and with peacock fan,
> Rested that merry gentleman;
> And nothing him dismayed.

It is not in the moment of reading, but in the moment after, that one sees the rich absurdity of suggesting a parallel between a piece of officiousness and the Massacre of the Innocents. The shot is aimed too high: it whistles harmlessly over the head of the Chief Constable, who, searching his private conscience, may very well decide that compared with Herod's his record is a fair one. Perhaps the scorn is here a little forced; but no one can doubt the white heat of the scorn that flames in the *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. It is the final, the perfect comment on a notorious misgovernment. To the student of

Chesterton it is of special interest, because it marks one of the rare occasions on which the bitterness in him totally overwhelms laughter, even the laughter of mockery.

> The men that worked for England
> They have their graves at home:
> And bees and birds of England
> About the cross can roam.
>
> But they that fought for England,
> Following a falling star,
> Alas, alas for England
> They have their graves afar.
>
> And they that rule in England,
> In stately conclave met,
> Alas, alas for England
> They have no graves as yet.

But to emphasise his crusading chivalry to the neglect of all other aspects of his activity would be to leave this preliminary sketch woefully out of drawing. His wit and his fancy are too conspicuous to be treated as mere incidentals of literary method. Fancy, especially, is of the very essence of the matter. Our crusader draws his sword against drab philosophies because they affront his own philosophy

of strenuous gaiety and holy mirth. For him the pursuit of righteousness is an adventure; it is even, as one can imagine himself saying, a kind of celestial lark, as merry as a schoolboy lark, and as lovely as the 'blithe spirit' of Shelley's ode. To his intellectual foes life may be a sordid tale signifying only the triumph of the worm; to him it is a battle infinitely beautiful, a pageant infinitely perilous. He has the artist's delight in form and colour, and the artist's contempt for the woolly phrasing that is the product of inexact thinking.

> It is a mark of false religion that it is always trying to express concrete facts as abstract; it calls sex affinity; it calls wine alcohol; it calls brute starvation the economic problem. The test of true religion is that its energy drives exactly the other way; it is always trying to make abstract things as plain and solid as concrete things; always trying to make men, not merely admit the truth, but see, smell, handle, hear and devour the truth.*

But clear, hard writing, more cunningly

*From *Alarms and Discursions* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

and no less effectively than vague writing, can betray the unwary reader. The academic philosopher, dealing in isms and ologies, may succeed in communicating to us only his confusion, or he may succeed in hiding that confusion. The popular philosopher wields a more dangerous power. The one can persuade us to believe vaguely in a muddle : the other can persuade us to believe confidently in a falsehood. If you say to a Hottentot, ' The bardic proclivities of Shelley tended towards an exploitation of the aesthetic possibilities of verbal phonology, whereas those of Keats impelled him in the direction of a sensuous imagism,' you make a fool of yourself to no purpose. But if you say, ' Shelley sang songs ; Keats drew pictures,' you are in danger of making a fool of the Hottentot. Quite possibly he will go to his grave believing that Shelley and Keats were a pair of music-hall comedians, the one a singer, the other a lightning illustrator. I give this example with the more assurance because it is just

the sort of example that Chesterton himself might choose in one of his weaker moments. To express the abstract in terms of the concrete is the function and glory of all art; but clear and concrete imagery, while it makes for excellent literature, may also be employed to camouflage shallow philosophising. One can prove almost anything by a deft choice of clever, vivid metaphors that ignore fine shades, and bruise, as all metaphors do, the truth at which they grasp. The result may be a series of minute inexactitudes, each negligible in itself but each contributing its mite to the cumulative error. Perhaps this is why *Orthodoxy*, unquestionably a sincere book and one that bristles with cleverness, excites the very misgiving it is designed to allay. It is like a wonderful debating speech that dazzles without convincing. With one hand the author pelts us with paradoxes, while with the other he never ceases to throw dust in our eyes.

If the controversialist cannot always

win us, the creator of fantasy is irresistible. We have all had the experience of hearing a familiar word become strange to us by repetition, of seeing a familiar object become grotesque, even elfish, while we gaze at it. Ten thousand times we look at our teapot ; and then, looking once more, for the first time we see it—see it as a monstrous and unsignifying shape in matter. This ordinary faculty of seeing things, as with the eyes of a new-born child, denuded of their rational and sentimental associations, is one that Mr Chesterton possesses in an extraordinary degree ; and to it we owe some of his happiest whimsies.

> Did you ever hear a small boy complain of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train ? No ; for to him to be inside a railway station is to be inside a cavern of wonder and a palace of poetical pleasures. Because to him the red light and the green light on the signal are like a new sun and a new moon. Because to him when the wooden arm of the signal falls down suddenly, it is as if a great king had thrown down his staff as a signal and started a shrieking tournament of trains.*

*From *All Things Considered* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

'I myself,' he adds, 'am of little boys' habit in this matter.' And the remark is not to be dismissed as a piece of playful affectation, that affectation which is a legitimate and very pleasant item in the essayist's box of tricks. Every book Chesterton has written bears witness to its sober truth. He may exaggerate the queerness of his vision; he may, and does, exploit it for our fun and for his own; but he does not invent it. It is a fact, not a fiction, that he embellishes with fancy.

An unavoidable convention of essays such as the one on which I am at this moment engaged is that one has to keep up the pretence of supposing the reader to be unacquainted with the subject, while perfectly aware that if he were unacquainted with it he would not be reading a book about it. The necessity for this harmless piece of humbug once admitted, there is no need to apologise for multiplying examples of Chesterton's odd way of seeing

things and his spirited way of describing them. However well-informed you may be, I have to assume that you are abysmally ignorant and to cater for your ignorance. Men do their best work, very often, in the days when their reputations are still in the making. Shaw's *Saturday Review* articles have never been surpassed in freshness and spirit by his subsequent adventures in print. Chesterton has never been more exuberantly himself than in the essays he contributed, Saturday by Saturday, to a London newspaper. The dew was on those essays when they appeared, and it is still there, as if newly fallen. Here is a passage* taken at random: 'I have never understood what people mean by domesticity being tame; it seems to me one of the wildest of adventures. But if you wish to see how high and harsh and fantastic an adventure it is, consider only the actual structure of a house itself.'

*From *All Things Considered* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

And, a few pages later, on the same theme : 'As I drew near my own house, its huge size began to horrify me ; and when I came to the porch of it I discovered with an incredulity as strong as despair that my house was actually bigger than myself. . . . I was Jonah ; my house was the huge and hungry fish ; and even as its jaws darkened and closed about me I had again this dreadful fancy touching the dizzy altitude of all the works of man. I climbed the stairs stubbornly, planting each foot with savage care, as if ascending a glacier. . . . I climbed each flight like a ladder in naked sky.' This, you may say, is not remarkable ; half a dozen essayists could have done that as well or better. But between him and the others there is, I believe, an important difference. I have already hinted at it. What is art, and even artfulness, in the average inventor of fancies is nature, embellished by art, in Chesterton ; and for evidence of this there is that ponderous light-hearted volume into which I have

imagined all his works being collected. In every page of that volume you will find examples of his queer vision. His creed takes a form as fantastic as his most humorous fancies. The man who can write like this of a cab-ride—

> The whole landscape seemed charging at me—and just missing me. The tall shining grass went by like showers of arrows; the very trees seemed like lances hurled at my heart, and shaving it by a hair's breadth. Across some vast, smooth valley I saw a beech-tree by the white road stand up little and defiant. It grew bigger and bigger with blinding rapidity. It charged me like a tilting knight, seemed to hack at my head, and pass by. Sometimes, when we went round a curve of road, the effect was yet more awful. It seemed as if some tree or windmill swung round to smite like a boomerang. The sun by this time was a blazing fact; and I saw that all Nature is chivalrous and militant. We do wrong to seek peace in Nature; we should rather seek the nobler sort of war; and see all the trees as green banners—*

the man who can write like this of a cab-ride can write with equal wit and vigour of

*From *Tremendous Trifles* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

God, for he happens to be one of the few who believe that God is as real as the cab. This is how he greeted the censoring of Bernard Shaw's play, *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet:*

> As far as I can discover, it has been forbidden because one of the characters professes a belief in God and states his conviction that God has got him. . . . You are free in our time to say that God does not exist; you are free to say (like poor old Renan) that He would like to exist if He could. You may talk of God as a metaphor or a mystification; you may water Him down with gallons of long words, or boil Him to the rags of metaphysics; and it is not merely that nobody punishes, but nobody protests. But if you speak of God as a fact, as a thing like a tiger, as a reason for changing one's conduct, then the modern world will stop you somehow if it can.

Mr Blank, that elegant essayist, might be capable of writing the passage about the cab-ride; but he is not capable of even reading the passage about God without dashing off a letter of shocked protest to the Church Family Newspaper. To Mr

Blank, Chesterton's theological jokes are intolerable. To joke about sex is well enough, when the ladies have left the table, but to joke about sects is in bad taste. The man to whom Christianity is real does not deny a sense of humour even to the Holy Family, and does not mistake craven servility for reverence. It is the man for whom Christianity is a mere fashion, Respectability decked out in her Sunday best, who believes (so far as he believes anything) that God is a kind of elderly business man doing a busy trade in repentance, atonement, forgiveness, and similar stuff, and very touchy about the details of conversational decorum.

Chesterton will have none of this grocerly cant. He is the defender of a faith that appears noble even to those to whom it appears fantastic and incredible. In religious philosophy he fights for an historic creed ; in ethics he acclaims the primitive virtues. And in these days it is necessary to add that he admires the primitive virtues

without thereby extolling the modern vices that in some quarters they have become. We can admire animal courage without deifying, as our cheap fiction-mongers do, animal cruelty. I have said that in his writings he is always himself and can never be mistaken for another. Gilbert Chesterton's attitude to modern problems is always Chestertonian, and not infrequently it is Gilbertian. The essay of which this chapter is merely the opening gambit aims at being in a double sense an exposition: it aims at exposing Chesterton as well as at expounding him.

II DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

IT used to be urged by old-fashioned freethinkers that Christianity was incredible because it was incomprehensible; and the stock reply to this was that a religion that could be understood would not be worth believing. In its way it was an effective reply, but its way happens to be a very wily way, the way of intentional misunderstanding. The freethinker was attacking a creed; the Christian was defending an emotion; and of this cross-purpose endless barren controversy was born. It provides a spectacle like that of the two clowns at the music hall who dance round each other planting savage blows in mid air. A spiritual experience cannot be argued about; like the fine frenzy of the poet, it is beyond the realm of argument, which is the intellectual realm. But a system of theology can be argued about: it can even be demolished

by argument. When rapture seeks to assume rational dress it exposes itself to rational criticism : when it begins to flourish the sword of reason it takes the risk of being slain by the sword of reason. Every religion worth considering had its source, however remote that source, in some kind of experience that for convenience we may call mystical. But the strength and the weakness of mystical faith is that it cannot be communicated except to those who, being themselves mystics, have no need of the communication. In the realm of theology the mystic is at no advantage : he may be endowed with supernormal powers of spiritual apprehension ; he may even, for all we know, achieve contact with Reality itself ; but in the translation of that ecstasy into intellectual doctrine there is infinite scope for error.

It is idle to complain of any religious creed that it is not totally comprehensible, but it is far from idle to complain that it is totally incomprehensible, for

if it were that it would be totally unmeaning. We do not ask the Christian for a precise definition of terms some of which, by hypothesis, are indefinable; we do not require him to tell us God's size in boots or to produce a scale-map of the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone where their worm dieth not. But we do ask the man who has a stock formula by which to answer every question that he will permit us to examine it as a formula, not oblige us to venerate it as a magic incantation. It is true that one's interest in life depends on that element of unexpectedness, that imminence of surprise, that immanence of miracle, which are incompatible with absolute intellectual comprehension. It is true, but as an argument against freethought it is irrelevant. If the word secularist means a man to whom nothing is sacred, and if the word rationalist means a man for whom nothing has mystery, then it is legitimate to taunt the secularist and the rationalist with being dull dogs. But the

pretence that everyone who holds aloof from a belief in God, for example, on rational grounds, is unaware of the omnipresent mystery of life is a piece of startling impudence. It is the agnostic himself, Herbert Spencer, who declares that the universe with all that it contains is a mystery ever pressing for interpretation; and it is the stupider kind of Christian to whom the universe is a mystery only by courtesy, a mystery for which he possesses a reach-me-down explanation. This kind of stupidity, which is also a kind of sloth, uses the word 'mystery' as a convenient excuse for repeating parrot-phrases that save the trouble of clear thinking. Those who are attracted by 'the great mysteries of religion,' and who yet cannot perceive that every moment of life is miraculous, are those who love darkness better than light. They prefer to look upon the sunshine through smoked spectacles or stained glass windows, presumably because they have weak eyes.

This confounding of the appreciation of life's mystery with belief in a specific theory of life's origin must be insisted upon, because it lies at the root of much of the nonsense that disfigures popular controversy. Every man alive is conscious of mystery: only the man who has lost his most vital faculty, the faculty of wonder, supposes himself to possess an ultimate explanation of anything in the world, from the growth of his own finger-nails to the rhythms of the solar system. In this matter Mr Chesterton, whom I have described as generally in conflict with his age, is on the side of all sane men, in this age or any other. He derides, as who does not, the pretensions of scientists to answer the unanswerable enigma. The notion that one can find the secret meaning of life by chemical analysis—or, for that matter, by a chemical synthesis that should result in biological life itself—is comical enough. You can put infinite mystery into a test-tube, and infinite mystery is all you will

ever take out of it. But if this is comical it is not more comical than the notion that theism can explain anything. You cannot explain the existence of a cow with five horns by pointing to a horse with seven legs. You cannot even explain the existence of a human baby by naming its parents: that is (on the most favourable estimate) only to push the problem one generation back. When he is told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth every intelligent child wonders who created God. The late T. E. Brown, author of a revolting poem about babies, in the course of another and less revolting poem about his garden expressed his astonishment that anyone could fail to believe in God while in the presence of exquisite beauty:

> Not God! in gardens! when the eve is cool?
> Nay, but I have a sign;
> 'Tis very sure God walks in mine.

As the expression of an emotion that all sensitive people have at one time or another

experienced, this may pass; but as an argument you use it at your peril. Yet it is a very common argument. 'Flowers, stars, a mother's love—how can you explain these things without God?' We cannot explain them without God; we cannot explain them with God; we could not, even if we established His existence, explain God. In brief, the search for an ultimate and complete explanation of the universe and of life is a wild goose chase, exhilarating but leading to nothing. To offer the word 'God' as an explanation of anything whatsoever is not to oppose agnosticism—it is merely to evade agnosticism. You could evade it with an equal show of reason by murmuring 'Abracadabra!' and sticking straws in your hair.

Without demanding a precise definition, I think we are entitled to ask of any man who brings God into a discussion whether he is using that term to express poetic emotion, response to beauty, sense of wonder, or what not, or whether he refers to a

personal and more or less anthropomorphic Creator. It is a word that, on the lips of a man whose philosophy we do not know, has become denuded of meaning. It has no meaning, because it has so many meanings. As a symbol of the unknown it may serve a very useful purpose in rebuking spiritual arrogance and in humbling intellectual pride ; but unfortunately it has ceased very largely to serve this purpose for the simple reason that most of the people who use it suffer from the entertaining delusion that the mind of God is an open book to them. They are ready at a moment's notice to inform you of His taste in morals, in religious ritual, in personal conduct, and His views on Sunday football. They pay him the unique compliment of believing that He shares their own private opinions. The Baptist believes Him to be a very large and invisible Baptist who spends eternity designing punishments for those who disdain the rite of total immersion. The Band of Hope Leader

imagines Him as a colossal Teetotaller who curses whenever a cork is drawn. And if there is an element of parody in my examples there is, I hope, more than an element of parody in these theologies. There is a sense in which, as has often been said, every man creates God in his own image; and it is obvious that one cannot conceive of a Being utterly alien in nature to oneself, cannot worship a Being without believing Him to be good. But this is a different matter from attributing to Deity one's own prejudices and idiosyncracies. Mr Chesterton does not commit this blasphemy. When he writes, 'Perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon—when Mr Chesterton writes this he is supposing God to be as jolly a fellow as he himself is, which is, after all, only to attribute his glorious child-like exuberance to its supposed source. But this is not the point I wish to emphasise.

What I wish to emphasise is that Mr Chesterton by his habit of hard thinking and concrete writing has done as much as any man living to clarify religious controversy. Of breadth of mind, in the modern sense that means absence of conviction, he has nothing. He is not one of those exasperating people who smile at you in a vague muddle-headed benevolence and declare that we all mean the same thing. He will not hurl at you that most insulting of all accusations, that you are a Christian in spite of yourself; nor will he evade argument by saying that since you admire goodness and beauty you necessarily believe in God. His church is supposed to be the enemy of individual liberty, but he himself will grant you a liberty that the latitudinarians of the New Theology will deny you with a patient smile, the liberty of calling yourself an atheist without contradiction. If you call yourself an atheist, he will as likely as not call you a fool, but he will not suggest

that you do not know your own mind. The evolution of the idea of God has been a movement from the solid to the nebulous —a reversal of the process by which the earth was evolved from a gaseous ball. Ever since the time when the heathen in his blindness bowed down to wood and stone, God has been becoming more and more gaseous, until, in Shelley's correspondence (to go no further), He appears as 'the soul of the universe, the intelligent and necessarily beneficent actuating principle.' In Mr Chesterton's writings the process has been arrested and reversed. 'God is not a symbol of goodness: goodness is a symbol of God.' The wheel is come full circle. I do not mean that Mr Chesterton's God is made of wood or of stone: I do mean that, to Mr Chesterton, He is a reality far more solid and certain than wood or stone. Nor is this saying much, for pure reason can question the reality of matter as legitimately and as plausibly as Mr Clodd can doubt the existence of the exalted

Personage whose name rhymes with his own. The only thing of which I can be certain, in the purely rational sense, is my own existence ; for of that I have immediate knowledge, in my own consciousness, whereas of all other things I possess only the mediated evidence of my five senses. I cannot deny myself, because in doing so I should affirm myself ; but I can, if I choose, deny everything external to myself, including, of course, my own body. This is elementary enough, but if there should be anyone so simple as to doubt it he may have his doubts set at rest by resorting to almost any popular work on philosophy. And lest this entertaining scepticism should become a desolating denial, lest each man should depopulate the world by mentally murdering all his fellows, we must have recourse to dogma—this, it seems to me, is implicit in the first of the two books I am considering in this chapter, and it is the foundation upon which the second is built. It is stated, with characteristic

brilliance and more than characteristic splendour, in the final chapter of *Heretics*. It is the pivot upon which *Orthodoxy* turns. 'There are no rationalists,' says Mr Chesterton, taking leave of his heretics. 'We all believe fairy-tales, and live in them. Some, with a sumptuous literary turn, believe in the existence of the lady clothed with the sun. Some, with a more rustic, elvish instinct, like Mr McCabe, believe merely in the impossible sun itself. Some hold the undemonstrable dogma of the existence of God; some the equally undemonstrable dogma of the existence of the man next door.' These last two sentences are more witty than wise. What do they amount to? The suggestion underlying them, the inference that the author wants us to draw, is that it is as foolish not to believe in God, whom we have not seen, as in the man next door, whom we have seen. The two beliefs are not parallel, and the trick of labelling them both dogmas does not make them parallel. They are

not both dogmas. One might go further and say that they are both not dogmas, until they have been challenged as assumptions ; for a dogma is merely an assumption translated into doctrine and raised to legal status. All thought is based on a primary assumption or a set of assumptions : that is why thought is fallible and dangerous. The world of thought is full of well-constructed systems built on false foundations. This danger of error, which varies directly with the scope of the primary assumption, makes it a point of honour, as well as a counsel of prudence, that in any intellectual enquiry we should assume as little as possible. It is considered sharp practice, for example, to assume the very theory that happens to be in dispute. Now the assumption of the existence of the man next door, however unnecessary in a parliament of pure reason, is one that has to be entertained if our thinking is to have any issue in action. If we had not already made the assumption before we began

thinking at all, we should be forced to make it, and if necessary to insist upon it as a dogma, because we cannot, short of lunacy, live on the contrary assumption. Belief in the existence of God, whether assumption or dogma, is another story altogether. It is just as irrational as belief in one's neighbour, but—if I may make a fine distinction—it is more unreasonable. The evidence of commonsense, that is, the evidence of our common senses, may or may not be reliable, but there is at least a probability that it is not totally unreliable. Here we have five witnesses of a sort, and all of them have something to say about the man next door. About God they are silent. We can, if we are made that way, suppose all five to be liars, a little band of brothers in atheism; but in point of fact we do not. Nor—and this is important—does Mr Chesterton. Mr Chesterton's 'rustic elvish instinct' is as much in evidence as his 'sumptuous literary turn'; for he believes in both prodigies;

he believes in God and also in the man next door. He makes the unnecessary irrational assumption as well as the necessary irrational assumption. He holds two dogmas where the agnostic holds only one.

Heretics is a plea for stability in ideals, for a definition of first principles, for the establishment of fixed standards: in a word, it is a plea for Authority. Proceeding in the belief that the most important thing about any man is his philosophy, it deals with the author's 'most distinguished contemporaries, not personally or in a merely literary manner, but in relation to the real body of doctrine which they teach.' The men discussed include Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, George Moore, Bernard Shaw, and Lowes Dickinson. That it is a book teeming with shrewd criticism goes without saying. Nothing could be more apt than the remark he casually drops about Mr Wells: 'He . . . has not stopped growing. One can lie awake at night and hear him grow.' Felicities of this

kind abound, and they are too conspicuous to need advertisement from me. What is less conspicuous is the superficiality of some of the minor arguments. 'Hasty but sincere papers,' Mr Chesterton calls these essays, and we need not hesitate to accept the description. Like most other quickwitted writers, Mr Chesterton is generally in a hurry. Criticising Mr Wells's *Mankind in the Making*, he says:

> The whole is set forward so sensibly that it is a few moments at least before the reader realizes that it is another example of unconscious shirking. What is the good of begetting a man until we have settled what is the good of being a man? You are merely handing on to him a problem you dare not settle yourself. It is as if a man were asked, 'What is the use of a hammer?' and answered 'To make hammers;' and when asked, 'And of those hammers, what is the use?' answered, 'To make hammers again.' Just as such a man would be perpetually putting off the question of the ultimate use of carpentry, so Mr Wells and all the rest of us are by these phrases successfully putting off the question of the ultimate value of the human life.

That amazing question, 'What is the good

of begetting a man until we have settled what is the good of being a man? ' might have been posed by the coldest of rationalists. It ignores the very truth that Mr Chesterton himself bears witness to: that life comes first, and reason a bad second. If life is worth living life is worth transmitting; and Mr Chesterton would be the first to declare that every man who is not a suicide decides practically, whatever he may profess, that life *is* worth living. And even if this were not so, or even if Mr Wells were convicted of wishing himself dead, he would still have an effective reply. He could reply that he had written his book in the belief that the begetting of children had become a habit to which men were so shamefully addicted that it was almost second nature to them: nothing could cure them of it. This being so, he could only make the best of a bad job by trying to improve the physical and mental condition of potential parents. The fact is, Mr Chesterton can rationalise as remotely

as the next man when it suits his purpose. For example, he defends the killing and eating of beef and poultry by assuming a posture of mock-reverent agnosticism before the mystery of the turkey. It is excellent fooling, but that is all. He contends in effect that we know nothing about the emotions and sensations of a turkey, in a word, its inner life: which is true. It is true also that we know nothing, or next to nothing, about the inner life of a deaf and dumb idiot, but we do not on that account bake him in a pie. Robinson Crusoe objected to Man Friday's proposal to eat the bodies of his enemies, and the objection was a purely irrational one. No vegetarian faddist could be more irrational. There was no question of cruelty; there was no question of killing. The inner life of those savages presented no problem at all, for they were already dead. The only question was whether to put their remains in the larder or to bury them. Man Friday took the rational

view, but Robinson Crusoe could not appreciate it, poor fellow. The result was a dispute which ended in a triumph for sentiment and a wanton waste of good food. The people who abstain from meat-eating do so in deference to their sentiment against the use of dead bodies for food, and rational arguments affect that sentiment no more than rational arguments would affect Mr Chesterton's sentiment against making a meal of his next-door neighbour. For all I know, there may be excellent reasons in favour of such a meal, but however powerful those reasons, and however appetising the neighbour, I for one should not care to be present at table.

Another example of this 'talking for victory' is to be found in the admirable and well-deserved attack on the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* which Mr Chesterton delivers in the course of his remarks on Whistler. Someone had said that morality should be wholly subordinated to art in criticism, because art is the same in all

ages whereas morality differs in every period in every respect. I find it difficult to believe that any intelligent man ever committed himself to that last phrase, 'in every period in every respect,' but if Mr Chesterton is not here (unconsciously) misrepresenting his opponent's argument, it is certain that the opponent himself is doing so. Mr Chesterton remarks, 'He appears to defy his critics or his readers to mention any permanent feature or quality in ethics. . . . Unquestionably it is a very common phrase of modern intellectualism to say that the morality of one age can be entirely different to the morality of another. And like a great many other phrases of modern intellectualism, it means literally nothing at all. If the two moralities are entirely different, why do you call them both moralities?' The whole force of that criticism rests on that one word 'entirely,' which I suspect to have been interpolated. It is true that one morality cannot entirely, in the strict philosophical sense of absolutely,

differ from another morality; because it is true that no thing can differ entirely from any other thing. There is an element of unity, a common quality, in all things in the universe, as the very word universe implies. The universe is a colossal bundle of contradictions: that is why it is inexplicable. In ridiculing the notion of an absolute difference between two moralities Mr Chesterton need not have stopped at camels. He imagines someone saying, 'Camels in various places are totally diverse; some have six legs, some have none, some have scales, etc. There is no point which they have in common.' To which the interlocutor replies, 'Then what makes you call them all camels?' I say that Mr Chesterton need not have stopped here. There is a unity, not only between all camels, but between a camel and Mr Chesterton, between honesty (I refer to the plant) and the Houses of Parliament, between frogs and alarum clocks, and between (to take Mr Chesterton's

example of disconnected things) black and triangular. This curious quarrel between the art-artist and the morality-artist is, in truth, like so many other disputes, a quarrel about terminology. They use the word morality in two different senses. To the aesthete it signifies, for the purpose of his argument, no more than the set of rules in vogue at any given moment restricting human relationships. Like other fashions, it constantly changes; it varies with place, as with time. It is not a mystic standard, eternal in the heavens: it is a more or less convenient arrangement decided on by a show of hands. If morality were all, the Kingdom of Heaven could be won by accurate counting. In this country a man is immoral who acquires more than one wife at a time; but there probably exists somewhere in the world a community, no less rigid in its respectability, where you would be indicted as a moral leper if you allowed the number of your wives to fall below half a dozen. Clearly these

interesting parochial problems are not the artist's primary concern, although, being a man as well as an artist, he will no doubt be not indifferent to them. In his art he will concern himself less with particular rules of conduct than with the spiritual realities of which they are at best the inadequate symbols. He will be a moralist, because he is a man, but he will not be a *mere* moralist, just as, in the matter of clothes, he will favour certain fashions, and adopt them to the neglect of others, without being a mere tailor's dummy. He will judge fashions in dress by reference to his idea or ideal (let us say) of beauty; he will judge fashions in conduct, that is morality, by reference to his idea or ideal of —what? He, the aesthete, will say, 'Beauty' again; Mr Chesterton will say, 'Morality.' And the aesthete, after all, has etymology on his side; for the word 'moral' is only the word 'customary' in a latinised form. The whole dispute turns on the name we choose to give to the

spiritual vision, or spiritual aspiration, by which, in the mind or soul of each man, all things are measured. Whether you fight an ideal as immoral or as ugly matters little: what is important is that you fight it and defend its opposite. The artist's business is to communicate his vision of life—less his views than his view; and infidelity to that vision is the unforgiveable sin. Sincerity is the greatest achievement of style and the glory of the greatest art. One of the most startlingly false things that Wilde ever wrote was that insincerity is a device for extending one's personality. (I paraphrase from memory.) This is precisely the reverse of the truth. The man who lives in a mask not only hides his face from others: he hides it from himself, until he forgets what he is. If you do not write in your own life-blood you write in water. The little artist, like Wilde himself, tries to make his life as artificial as a (bad) work of art; the great artist succeeds in breathing into his art the spontaneity of

a work of nature. And this, if not Chesterton's view, is closely akin to it. 'Any man with a vital knowledge of the human psychology ought to have the most profound suspicion of anybody who claims to be an artist, and talks a great deal about art. Art is a right and human thing, like walking or saying one's prayers; but the moment it begins to be talked about very solemnly, a man may be fairly certain that the thing has come into a congestion and a kind of difficulty. The artistic temperament is a disease that afflicts amateurs.' Anyone who has spent ten minutes in the company of two or three artists talking shop will recognise the force of this. They talk, not about Art or Beauty or anything else that begins with a capital letter, but about details of technique or about particular works of art. It is in artistic circles that the word 'artistic' is least in favour. It is the commercial builder who talks about 'artistic residences'; the artist is more likely to

commit the solecism of calling them ' nice,' unless, which is more probable still, he calls them nasty.

Before passing from *Heretics* to consider that still better book, *Orthodoxy*, we may mark another instance of rather unsatisfying ingenuity of argument. It occurs in the defence of the family as an institution. It is a defence that stands the ordinary defence on its head. The family is usually defended, according to Chesterton, because amid the stress and fickleness of life it alone is peaceful, pleasant, and at one. He, on the other hand, defends the family because it is ' not peaceful and not pleasant and not at one.' An unhappy marriage, where all is sin and shame, could be defended in the same terms, but let that pass. ' The man who lives in a small community lives in a much larger world. He knows much more of the fierce varieties and uncompromising divergences of men. The reason is obvious. In a large community we can choose our companions.

In a small community our companions are chosen for us.' The argument proceeds by pointing out that men who form themselves into groups drawn together by sympathy shut out the real world, with its endless diversity of temperament and opinion ; that there is nothing really narrow about the clan, the really narrow thing being the clique. If we concede all this, which has undoubtedly a grain of truth in it, we may congratulate the children in a family on their luck in being so ill-assorted, so unsympathetically grouped ; but we must as certainly regard with horror and compassion the pitiful plight of the parents who, by having had the hardihood to choose each other in marriage, have formed the smallest and narrowest of cliques, a mutual admiration society with a limited membership of two. And I do not say this altogether in irony, for if husband and wife knew only each other (and their children) their case would indeed be pitiable. The institution of the family may

be an excellent one, or an inevitable one; but it is idle to contend that it is a broadening influence, or that it makes for diversity of ideas in the individual. Mr Chesterton (in a delightful paragraph) makes much of the fact that our blood-relations are not of our choice. He exults in the notion that our father and mother 'lie in wait for us and leap out on us, like brigands from a bush.' The supreme adventure, he says, is not falling in love: it is being born. Yet when the Eugenists offer to make marriage equally unvolitional, equally intoxicating and romantic, he spurns the suggestion. Our brothers, with whom we probably have to live twenty years, are thrust upon us, and Mr Chesterton spends sixteen pages lyrically celebrating his joy in the arrangement; but suggest (I should be the last to suggest it) that our wives should be thrust upon us, and he is affronted.

I have not attempted to summarise the general philosophy of *Heretics*, the constructive

principles upon which its destructive criticisms are based, because that has been done by the author himself in *Orthodoxy*. The first book is a series of sporadic raids ; the second is an orderly advance into the enemy territory. Mr Chesterton points to Shaw and Kipling as having demonstrated in their work that the fiercest dogmatists can make the best artists. A third brilliant dogmatist is Chesterton himself. These men (and to their names that of H. G. Wells must be added) started with an enormous advantage over their more languid brothers in art : each had a definite point of view. The value of Mr Chesterton's creed in his private life is a matter beyond my conjecture, but there can be no doubt at all of its tremendous value to him as literary stock-in-trade. He has written philosophy that is more fascinating than fiction, and fiction that is crammed with philosophy. One cannot conceive him in the position of trying to think of a subject to write about ; but one can

readily imagine him bewildered for a moment by the riot of attractive themes that present themselves. He writes of Bernard Shaw, 'He puts the Shaw test rapidly and rigorously to everything that happens in heaven or earth.' And that, *mutatis mutandis*, might be written of himself. Chesterton's creed is (or was) the Apostles' Creed, to which entertaining document his most characteristic book is a kind of introduction. It may now be well to consider that book in some detail.

Orthodoxy, as its author explains in his first chapter, is not an ecclesiastical treatise. Nor is it a theological treatise. Its aim is to shew that the central Christian theology is 'the best root of energy and sound ethics.' What it succeeds in shewing is that the central Christian theology provides a good set of pegs upon which an ingenious man may hang certain necessary paradoxes of existence. Any genuine mythology could be shewn by an equally ingenious man to be profoundly significant;

but that is no reason for treating a mythology as history. It is as if we were to paint a crude but elaborate picture, representing life as a series of athletic contests with Sin, Fear, Disease, Pride, and the rest, and then deluded ourselves into the belief that the picture was in fact a literal record, done by a contemporary, of particular Olympic Games. It is as if, finding certain truths dramatised in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we were to make it an article of our belief that the Delectable Mountains are marked on the map, and that the death of Faithful at a place called Vanity Fair was an historic event. I do not complain that Mr Chesterton finds symbolism in history: I complain that he translates symbolism into history. No praise could do more than justice to the skill with which he persuades us that the Christian story or theology fits in with certain spiritual truths ascertainable from experience. We must be proud because we bear the divine image ;

we must be humble because we have fallen and come short of the glory of God. We must never cease to hate sin, and never cease to love the sinner. We must hope against all reason; we must almost despair even in our hope. We must exercise charity, which is the greatest of the three irrational and peculiarly Christian virtues — a generous and undeserved forgiveness of sins, not a cold indifference arising from the intellectual conviction that there is no sin. In all things we must preserve a perilous balance between apparently opposite virtues; like Christ himself, we must be fierce, and yet meek; we must watch and pray; we must lose our lives to gain them. This, in crude summary, is Mr Chesterton's argument. All these emotional needs he discovered, one by one, in himself, and when after infinite pains he had carefully defined them he found that they had all been discovered and defined before in Orthodoxy. 'For if this book is a joke it is a joke against me.

I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before. If there is an element of farce in what follows, the farce is at my own expense; for this book explains how I fancied I was the first to set foot in Brighton and then found I was the last. It recounts my elephantine adventures in pursuit of the obvious.' All that it attempts to do, and all that it succeeds in doing, is to shew that, for those who can believe in it, there is emotional and intellectual satisfaction to be found in Christianity. It does not attempt to shew that Christianity is true, and it does not convince us even that it is probable. For, after all, the Apostles' Creed pretends to be something more than a bunch of spiritual verities: it makes definite statements which either do or do not correspond to objective truth; it asserts that certain things did happen, that certain things are happening, and that certain other things will happen. Mr Chesterton is too honest a thinker to

deny this : indeed he is too fairminded to fail to point it out. At the beginning of his last chapter he answers himself very effectively through the mouth of an imagined opponent. If I may be personal (that is, if I am not to adopt the stupid and dishonest pose of impersonality) he does roughly express what had been running in my own mind during the whole admirable entertainment. 'If you see clearly the kernel of common-sense in the nut of Christian orthodoxy, why cannot you simply take the kernel and leave the nut?' His answer to this I cannot pretend to do full justice to, because it is far too long to quote entirely.

> The first answer is simply to say that I am a rationalist. I like to have some intellectual justification for my intuitions. If I am treating man as a fallen being it is an intellectual convenience to me to believe that he fell; and I find, for some odd psychological reason, that I can deal better with a man's exercise of freewill if I believe that he has got it.

We may pass over the fact that the phrase

'fallen being' begs the very doctrine in dispute, merely remarking that (if we are humane) we treat the most intelligent and gentle of the lower animals much the same as we should treat the most undeveloped, the most primitive, the most barbarous of human animals, although, in Mr Chesterton's view, the one is fallen from a state of grace and the other has never known a state of grace. Let us concede the phrase, however, and see if there is any force in the argument. I suggest there is not. I suggest that man's fallen state can be as credibly accounted for by, let us say, an immanentist doctrine of the Fall as by the Christian doctrine of the Fall. Suppose we choose to say that in the beginning God transcendent divided His immortal essence, making many of One; that, the Word having become flesh, all things are letters in the word, multiple parts of that unity; in brief, that the Creation and the Incarnation were not two acts, but one. Suppose we choose to

say this—the doctrine will suit our intellectual convenience as well as another. All men have fallen, because all men are separated parts of God—'outcasts from Deity,' in AE's phrase. I do not say that this is so: I say that if we must have an explanation, here is a plausible one, and not a Christian one. But, in truth, to adduce man's consciousness of imperfection as evidence that he has fallen from a state of perfection is not good reasoning. One might as well say that a boy who yearns to have a beard must necessarily have fallen from a state of grace in which he resembled Santa Claus. I return to my earlier contention: that these doctrines, which profess to record historic or prehistoric events, may be no more than convenient dramatisations of ideas. If we tell a child that the stars are celestial lanterns lit every evening by a deceased Methodist preacher named Abraham Budge, we are propounding a theory that does, from the child's point of view, to some extent account

for the phenomenon of starlight. It may, for all I know, be true; but it may just as easily be false, and so, in the absence of evidence, I shall refrain from making this simple fancy an article of my private creed. Similarly, it may be true that man has fallen from innocence, that Jesus of Nazareth was immaculately conceived (in a sense, he certainly was, for all conceptions are immaculate), and that we ourselves shall rise from the dead and be judged. These things may be true, but they, too, may as easily be false. A case can be made out for them; a better case can be made out against them; but of proof or disproof there is none. Those who affirm and those who abstain from affirming are divided not by logic but by an act of faith, an unforced act of faith. All vital beliefs are involuntary: hence the absurdity of trying to hustle people into them by threats of hell-fire. Mr. Chesterton knows this and would admit it with his usual fine candour. He does not attempt, in *Orthodoxy*, to write

a book of ordinary Christian apologetics: he professes to do no more than give an account of his own growth in spiritual certainty. But I should be sorry for any reader, even the most careless, to suppose that by making hay of particular attacks on Christianity Mr Chesterton has shewn Christianity to be true, or even probable: that is why I am insisting, with such dismal iteration, that allegories are not necessarily true to objective facts because they happen to provide a convenient form in which the needs of the human spirit may be presented, as symbols, to the intellect. If any confirmation were required of this obvious truth Mr Chesterton's chapter on *The Ethics of Elfland* would provide it. He deals there 'with what ethic and philosophy come from being fed on fairy tales.' There is, he says, the chivalrous lesson of *Jack the Giant Killer:* that giants should be killed because they are gigantic. There is the lesson of *Cinderella —exaltavit humiles.* There is the lesson

of *Beauty and the Beast:* that a thing must be loved *before* it is loveable. But this argument, if argument it is, is one that can be used against him. If he can accept these excellent fairy-tale lessons without regarding the fairy-tales as historical records, why cannot he accept the commonsense inferences to be drawn from Christianity in the same spirit? If he says that he does, if he believes in Christianity as he believes in a fairy-tale, if he admires the Christian story as he admires Bunyan's allegory, then he is at one with many of those whom he imagines himself to be opposing.

If Christianity is incapable of being proved, it is certainly incapable (at least in its central dogmas) of being disproved. If there were any question of proof at all, the onus of proof would lie on the believer: not the onus of disproof on the non-believer. To prove anything is hard enough, but to prove a pure negative is impossible. To assert, for example, that dragons,

unicorns, angels, ghosts, fairies, or men with three heads—to assert that these things do not exist is not only to make a statement of which there is no proof, it is to make a statement for the truth of which there is no evidence, except the rough and ready kind of evidence upon which our magistrates imprison and our judges hang their fellows. We cannot make a systematic search in every hole and corner of the universe and so be sure that no unicorn however bashful, no angel however elusive, has escaped our notice. To deny these creatures is foolish dogmatism, because unnecessary dogmatism: the reasonable thing to do is to wait and see. In his one play, *Magic*, Mr Chesterton makes one of his characters define 'agnostic' as one who knows everything; and in *Orthodoxy* itself he is constantly confusing the agnostic with that convinced and credulous creature, the materialist. He refers at least once to a being whom he calls 'the agnostic of to-day' who is not free to believe in

anything. I have not met Mr Chesterton's favourite agnostic any more than I have met Mr Chesterton's God ; and I feel that their existence is open to question. No amount of verbal ingenuity can justify the attempt to identify the man who professes not to know with the man who professes to possess a complete explanation of the universe. Agnosticism, even though it endure for a lifetime, is a state of intellectual poise. The agnostic is not bound to accept any particular theory of existence ; nor is he bound to reject it. If he is a man with an active imagination and a sanguine temperament he will live in the perpetual hope that at any moment illumination may dawn upon him. His conviction is that at the moment the universe is unexplained ; he may indeed go so far as to add that, strictly speaking, it is inexplicable, since it transcends the scope of the human intellect, but that is a point of view that every sensible Christian shares with him. He will believe in God

or Immortality as soon as they are revealed to him : until that happy event he remains in a state of romantic expectancy. Mr H. G. Wells once described a certain Dodd, leading member of the Rationalist Press Association, as ' one of those Middle Victorians who go about with a preoccupied, caulking air, as though, after having been at great cost and pains to banish God from the Universe, they were resolved not to permit Him back on any terms whatsoever.' This gentleman used to look under his bed every night, lest the Deity should be lurking there, and kept a revolver under his pillow for fear of a revelation. For my part, if I look under my bed it is in the hope that the Deity *may* be lurking there ; and when I open my window wide it is in the hope that God may come like a thief in the night. If this is not a legitimate mingling of agnosticism and enquiry, there is no meaning in words.

If now we return to my quotation and examine the latter part of it, we shall find

that this, like the remark about fallen man, is a trick of words, though a more subtle one. 'I can deal better with a man's exercise of freewill if I believe that he has got it.' Clearly, it is not possible to deal with a man's 'exercise of freewill' if we do not believe him to possess freewill; but we can and do deal with his habit of choice, whether we believe in freewill or not. The word 'freewill' is merely a philosophical (or unphilosophical) label stuck on a certain phenomenon with which we are all familiar. Those of us who regard 'freewill' as a grotesque idea, postulating an unthinkable uncanny absence of conditions, do not deny the fact of choice (that is, the selection of one course of action to the neglect of others): we assert merely that choice is determined by preference, preference by character plus nature plus environment, and so back in a chain of cause-and-effect to events anterior to the chooser. We ourselves are links in the chain; we do, in this limited

sense, choose, but we choose according to our lights ; we are not the puppets of fate, but rather its agents. Life, which is one, works through us, who are its instruments. (What the deuce life is after I do not know, but that is another story.) The apostles of freedom, on the other hand, mean, if they mean anything, that every man is an uncaused cause of the effects that proceed from him ; they attribute to a man the miraculous and indeed inconceivable power that more logical Christians postulate only of their God, the First Cause. They conceive that a man can choose to act without the desire, or preference, that does in fact determine his choice of action. If a man, walking idly, came to cross-roads, and was moved neither by preference nor by vague impulse to follow either the one or the other of the two courses open to him, he would necessarily, it seems to me, die wondering. When will is free it is unconditioned, and when it is unconditioned it is impotent. But the

believers in freewill think otherwise, and they exultantly quote in their defence the hysterical bombast of the freethinker, Henley:

> I am the master of my fate,
> I am the captain of my soul.

It is worth remarking, though it has been remarked a thousand times before, that their argument, if it were valid, would shatter another favourite doctrine, the doctrine of the omniscience of God. If the future can be known even to the mind of Deity it follows that the future is as complete a pattern as the past, and a pattern, presumably, of the divine making. And from this point of view I must confess that to me atheism is a more attractive piece of dogmatism than its opposite. For us human beings the situation is saved by the fact that the future, inevitable or not, is unknown. The drama may be written to the last comma of the dialogue, to the minutest inflection of the voices that utter it, but to us who do not even

know our own words till they have left our lips, to us who can never for a moment lose the breathless *sensation* of freedom, it is a great adventure into the unknown. It is a drama that is also a voyage of discovery, and nothing can quench our pleasure in it—except the humiliating idea that watching us, listening, pulling the strings, knowing perfectly well what is to come next, is an almighty and complacent Author. Finally, if it is contended that determinism, if true, will paralyse men's wills as soon as it is realised, one must reply that, on the contrary, determinism is the very machinery by which their wills are directed into particular courses. And that individual determinists are inactive creatures, passively floating on a tide, is simply not true. Once determinism is understood the best thing to do is to forget it, and that is what all healthy-minded people do. One is forced to defend the tiresome truism only when Mr Chesterton singles it out for attack.

This familiar notion of life as a drama is one to which Mr Chesterton gives a glance in passing and a nod of qualified approval. 'According to Christianity . . . God had written, not so much a poem, but rather a play; a play He had planned as perfect, but which had necessarily been left to human actors and stage-managers, who had since made a great mess of it.' I intend no disrespect when I suggest that this is simply grotesque from a theological point of view. In speaking of God as the Author, and human beings as the actors, we must not lose sight of the incalculable advantage this Cosmic Playwright possesses over lesser craftsmen like Shakespeare and Shaw. For He, by hypothesis, has created not only the play but the players. It is surely a kind of levity to speak of the Almighty Playwright and the human actors and stagemanagers as if they were all independent persons. The objection (which is both aged and unanswerable) can be put bluntly by remarking that there is one thing that

an Omnipotent Will cannot do: it cannot fail of its purpose, even in the tiniest detail; it cannot will what it does not will. God made Adam, let us say, knowing in His omniscience that Adam would sin, knowing exactly how and when he would sin: how then can one resist the conclusion that the sin itself was part of the divine plan? In this matter Omar, whatever his ethics, has a sounder philosophy than the Christian, the absurdity of whose creed was never more powerfully demonstrated than by the pronouncements that Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, put into the mouth of his God. Elsewhere in the book it suits Mr Chesterton's argument to see life under the image of a story.

> I had always vaguely felt facts to be miracles in the sense that they are wonderful; now I began to think them miracles in the stricter sense that they were *wilful*. I mean that they were, or might be, repeated exercises of some will. In short, I had always believed that the world involved magic: now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician. And this pointed a profound emotion always present

> and sub-conscious; that this world of ours has some purpose; and if there is a purpose, there is a person. I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.

There is force in this, but I think it is force that will spend itself in vain in the infinite spaces of the universe. One cannot find a finite analogy to infinity: indeed one cannot usefully discuss infinity at all. If life appears to be like a story, that is because we have only a select, or selected, view of it. Each man's life is indeed a story selected from infinite material by his limited consciousness. His life is a story, and his mind is the story-teller; for story-telling is not, in the strict sense, creation, but selection. But even if we concede, for a moment, that the whole life of the universe may be fitly represented under the image of a story, and that the Author of that story is external to ourselves (though this is a contradiction), He remains for us no more than vague unimaginable Entity, infinite and therefore without conceivable

attributes. The universe (let me repeat) is a bundle of contradictions: that is why it is inexplicable; and that is why the nature of its Author is unknowable. The Inner Light, so scorned of Mr Chesterton, might help us here, were it not for the outer darkness of ignorance that surrounds it.

I have endeavoured to show that the quarrel between artist and moralist about the nature and function of art is very largely a quarrel about the meaning of one word, morality. I believe it might be shewn that the quarrel between the Free-willer and the Determinist is a quarrel largely about the meaning of another word, freedom. And I now propose to deal with a third dispute about which a similar contention would be valid. That is the dispute about miracles and the super-natural. Here again I can only be clear by speaking for myself rather than for the ideal agnostic. 'Somehow or other,' says Mr Chesterton, 'an extraordinary idea has arisen that the disbelievers in miracles

consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way.' The whole dispute turns upon the precise meanings we attach to the words ' miracle ' and ' supernatural.' If the first means ' a wonder that is beyond understanding ' and the second ' inexplicable by the laws of nature as we at present know them,' no one in his senses will deny the possibility of either the one or the other. I agree with Mr Chesterton that particular ' miracles,' that is extraordinary events for which we have no rational explanation, are to be accepted or rejected solely on the particular evidence, without reference to a materialistic dogma that such things cannot happen. But it is worth remarking that he would be a very naive and simple-minded materialist who fancied that he understood the nature of matter, and he would be quite the reverse of an agnostic who pretended to know the limits of natural possibility. What is in dispute, it seems

to me, is less whether certain alleged wonders did or did not happen—that is a tedious historical question—than whether this or that is the true interpretation of such wonders in general I am prepared to believe, let us say, that prodigies of healing, unfathomable by medical science, have occurred and do occur. Mr Chesterton also believes this. What divides us is not the historical fact but the philosophical inference to be drawn from that fact. I believe that these things are supernatural only in the sense that they are beyond our knowledge of nature : he believes that they are (as he has said) wilful as well as wonderful, the work of a magician acting upon the world from outside it. Therefore I suggest that Mr Chesterton is totally in error in supposing that 'the ordinary agnostic' disbelieves in Christianity because (among other reasons) 'miracles do not happen.' I myself, the most ordinary of agnostics, refuse to accept responsibility for that

statement of Matthew Arnold's. I would as soon accept responsibility for the notorious essay on Shelley, the essay written by Arnold the school-inspector behind the back of Arnold the poet. Other reasons for disbelief cited by Mr Chesterton are that the Middle Ages were barbaric, that Darwinism is demonstrated, that monks were lazy, that nuns are unhappy. And each of these propositions he categorically denies. But, whether affirmed or denied, how can they seriously affect the question of Christianity's truth? I find no mention of the Middle Ages, no mention of Darwinism and monks and nuns, in the Apostles' Creed. Mr Chesterton would reject as heartily as I do the Victorian nonsense about reconciling religion and science. It is like talking about reconciling the emotional content of a poem with the size of the type. Let Mr Chesterton rest assured that these are not the reasons that prevent 'the ordinary agnostic' from accepting Christianity. And, to have done

with this question of miracles, let me repeat that the question in dispute is not whether they happen but how they happen. It is true that I have no very confident belief that Jesus of Nazareth made wine out of water, that a voice from heaven was heard by men saying ' This is my beloved son,' or that demons were transferred from the Gadarene maniac to the Gadarene swine ; but such doubt as I entertain of these things does not rest on a persuasion of their impossibility : it rests on the persuasion that the evidence for them is insufficient to counterbalance their superficial improbability.

I claim Mr Chesterton's agreement with the very simple contention that religion and science can stand in no need of reconciliation, science being a system of observed facts, and religion, on its theological side, being the interpretation of observed facts including, of course, the facts of human psychology ; and I make this claim with the more confidence because in his third

chapter Mr Chesterton himself says something that implies that point of view. 'If evolution simply means that a positive thing called an ape turned very slowly into a positive thing called a man, then it is stingless for the most orthodox; for a personal God might just as well do things slowly as quickly, especially if, like the Christian God, he were outside time.' But he goes on to say that if it means anything more than this it means that there is no such thing as an ape to change and no such thing as a man for him to change into: it means that there are no things, that there is only an eternal flux. This he regards as an attack upon the mind itself, an idea destructive of all thought. Here we have the striking spectacle of a man passionately fond of what he calls the paradoxes of Christianity who yet boggles at the first suggestion of a paradox outside Christianity. When he meets one he is inclined to deride it as a contradiction in terms. Having swallowed a whole cart-

load of camels he strains at the merest midge. I am not aware that the doctrine of evolution has much to say about the philosophical conception of unity, and I am certainly not qualified to expound Darwinism in any sort of technical detail. Such an exposition is fortunately not required here. Biology may assume, or may deduce, the unity of biological life: with that I am less concerned than with the fact that an essential unity underlying all things—if I wished to annoy Mr Chesterton I should call it spiritual monism—is a philosophical truism that one can hardly avoid. One can indeed avoid it by embracing a heresy that he dislikes as much as he dislikes monism, the heresy that every separate thing is unique. The obvious way, as it seems to me, to escape from the intellectual dilemma is to accept a paradox, the paradox of multiplicity in unity, the paradox that all things are at once separate and united. Indeed the idea of separation involves the idea of

unity. This paradox, which is far more ancient than Christianity, liberates the mind at once from the notion that individualities are illusory, being merged in a kind of colossal jelly, and the notion of a separateness so absolute as to exclude the possibility of any common sympathy. And as I write the conviction grows upon me that my belief in this matter must be Chesterton's also, in spite of his seeming denial of it. For he writes with such hearty emphasis against both these extremes of error, the assertion of homogeneous unity and the assertion of absolute difference, that he cannot escape seeing the only way out. And yet in his attack on what he calls Buddhism (under which head various western versions of pantheism are grouped) he sees red at the suggestion of unity. 'Upon Mrs Besant's principle,' he very wittily remarks, 'the whole cosmos is only one enormously selfish person.' It is just here, he adds, that Christianity is on the side of humanity and liberty and

love, and against modern pantheism and immanence. 'Love desires personality: love therefore desires division.' This is a half-truth, one side of the paradox: which is only a devious way of saying that it is false. The word division is commonly and legitimately used as a symbol of hostility. If division were all that love desired it would be in the singular position of pining away for lack of what it already possesses and cannot hope to get rid of; it would get perpetual satisfaction, whereas the experience of all humanity shouts through the centuries that love never does get perpetual satisfaction. If lovers clamour for division, it is as if they were to clamour for a voice; it is as if they were to spend reams of paper and gallons of ink penning letters to each other complaining that they have no writing materials. They have division, and they can at any moment, when their ardour rises to a climax, emphasise their division by a final separation. But it is needless, as well as

dull, to labour the point. Mr Chesterton's epigram is manifestly incomplete. It is admitted that love, being a relation between different people, cannot exist if there are no people for it to exist between. That is evident. But it is equally evident that the impulse of love is towards union, not towards division. The impulse of love involves another paradox that Mr Chesterton eyes with disdain ; for it is an impulse that if carried to its logical extreme would make love impossible. If love could be absolutely consummated there would be an end of it. To state the whole matter more concisely, love is always attempting a suicide that it cannot achieve. It depends for its very existence on separateness, and it is always striving for union. It is itself the most convincing evidence of the underlying unity of life.

I have dealt in this old-fashioned way with some particular points in Mr Chesterton's confession of faith because I have the honour of sharing his opinion that a man's

beliefs are important. If I do not go so far as to say that they are the most important things about him (a proposition that it might not be difficult to prove), at least I contend that they are the most interesting things about him. One of the most enjoyable Christians I have met was a man who believed that if we continue to burn the earth in the form of coal, and allow rain to fall into the resultant cavities, the solid world will be displaced by a liquid one. If I were to write a book about such a man I should make much of his particular beliefs and little of his general principles. His rejection of popular astronomy on the plea that if the earth had peeled off the sun it would not have revolved but have 'fallen down'—this theory would have occupied more space than his fondness for his wife and his kindness to his children. And when I write a book about a man whose beliefs are at once more important and more credible even than these, I adopt the same

method. I could, had I so chosen, have adopted a more modern method. I could have said that we all, Mr Chesterton included, believe in liberty and progress and the march of civilisation, and that his religious ideas are of little account. I could even have hinted that he was an agnostic thinly disguising himself in a veil of fantasy, just as, by certain religious folk who cultivate 'breadth,' the author of this book will be regarded as a Christian coyly concealing himself under an agnostic's hat. But ideas, especially religious ideas, happen to be more entertaining, on the whole, than any amount of muddle-headed benevolence; and as for the march of civilisation, Mr Chesterton's main concern, in *Orthodoxy* as elsewhere, is to enquire what the devil civilisation is marching to, and to suggest that it is marching to the devil. If we descend from the plane of pure probability into the arena of what is quaintly called practical politics (a term that is generally an excuse for getting

nothing practical done), beliefs are not only interesting, they are of immense importance. Belief, for example, in the popular Christian God (a person whose popularity is baffling) is immensely important: it is immensely important (as one of his own characters remarks somewhere) that we should not hold it.

Yet it is true that without doing homage to the insane doctrine that we all mean the same thing, all people of spirit and imagination can claim to be on Mr Chesterton's side in one vital respect. Save for certain lapses (these will be discussed later), he does defend freedom and passion against the menaces of a paralysing pedantry. He stands for a joyous acceptance of life against puritanical evasion; he stands for rectitude against correctitude. He has nothing but derision for the man who will not dare to fall in love except by kind permission of his logical apparatus. He has denounced 'good taste' as the last and vilest of the superstitions: which

alone should endear him to all those of his fellows who are not life-parodying corpses. He has defended democracy, answering the sniffs of the superior person with suitable gestures of contempt. He has raised and held high the banner of life, and spat upon the black flag of respectability and death.

III MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

IF Mr Chesterton is often sagacious, if Mr Chesterton is often wrongheaded, he is nowhere more sagacious, and nowhere more wrongheaded, than in his opinions about marriage. On the one hand he has expressed in words so simple and homely as to seem platitudes a fundamental psychological truth of marriage; on the other hand he has shewn himself ready to sacrifice human life and happiness to an abstraction with the cruel piety and the fanatical fervour of a Druid priest immolating his fellows on the altar of his monstrous deities. In the work of Mr Chesterton, especially in his doctrine of marriage, idealism and idolatry kiss one another. They do more than kiss one another: they are themselves united in an indissoluble marriage, and the fruit of that misalliance is seen in the manifold errors that run wild in the pages of the

book called *The Superstition of Divorce.* Indeed, when one remembers the warm humanity, the genial kindliness of the man, as he stands revealed in his work as a whole, one is almost constrained to doubt the authorship of this arid document. He is always the enemy of cant and humbug and cruel levity, and yet there is surely something of levity in the calculated irrelevance of his arguments against divorce. Without offering the cheapest and dirtiest of insults, the charge of insincerity, I think it is fair to suggest that even Mr Chesterton himself cannot find his arguments very convincing. In his defence it must be urged that in writing this book he was in a position of peculiar difficulty. He had to invent reasons for holding an irrational conviction. I do not suggest that the conviction is any the worse for being irrational: I use that word as a term of description not as a term of abuse. Mr Chesterton was faced with the not very congenial and certainly not

easy task of defending in the language of secular controversy a dogma received from ecclesiastical authority. He, who recognises that authority, was addressing men who, in the mass, reject it. I cannot hope to get through this chapter without giving offence, so let me say at once that the result is unprofitable, a witty yet laborious attempt, covering a hundred and fifty pages, to circumvent common-sense. It should be needless to add that it is well worth reading, if only for the sake of its jokes. Mr Chesterton's God is agreeable enough when He says (as He is pictured saying in *Orthodoxy*), 'Do it again,' to the rising sun; but when He begins to demand wanton human sacrifices He becomes something more than a nuisance. To see Mr Chesterton turn aside from fighting capitalists and exposing hypocrites, and begin to sharpen his knife and to wax dithyrambic about the approaching slaughter of innocents, is a disconcerting experience. Applause dwindles into uneasy

silence, and we laugh on the other side of our mouths. If it were really God who forbade the alleviation of the misery of unhappy marriages, one would as soon worship Herod, a gentleman with similar tastes and more utilitarian motives.

The dogma that Mr Chesterton seeks to defend is the dogma of indissoluble marriage. Now between those who hold that dogma and those who reject it there can be no common ground for argument. The two parties live in different worlds and have altogether different touch-stones for conduct. Those who believe that every marriage was made in heaven, and must not be unmade on earth, will necessarily oppose divorce regardless of all human consequences. And it is worth noting that all people holding that singular belief who do not also hold the Roman Catholic dogma of an infallible church are in a very curious position. It is open to anyone to believe that all true (that is, successful) marriages are made in

heaven, the misalliances being merely human counterfeits; but only a Roman Catholic can consistently hold that there is an exact correspondence between the Will of God and every particular wedding celebrated by His priests. There is indeed a third theory, religious fatalism: the theory that if God did not approve of this or that marriage He would not permit it; but as this is a line of argument that can be employed with equal force in a defence of murder, or of any other atrocity, it is unlikely to find favour with either the Christian or the moralist. The reader will notice that I have so far said nothing about merely civil marriages, and the omission is deliberate. Not even a Roman Catholic, believing in the absolute sanctification, by ritual, of any union however disastrous its nature, not even he can suppose that the legal ceremony conducted by a mere state official, the registrar, can have the same effect. If he is consistent he will, indeed, regard as unmarried all

those who have not been married by his church: which means, I am happy to say, the vast majority of mankind. We have, then, two forms of marriage: civil (or registered) marriage, and ecclesiastical (or sanctified) marriage. Ecclesiastical marriage is also registered, because it implies a social contract; and civil marriage is not infrequently sanctified, because it implies a reciprocal passion; but these are minor considerations that may, for the sake of clarity, be left on one side. The fact to seize is that there is a vital distinction between the civil and the religious ceremony. Divorce is not provided for at all in Church Law, so far as I am aware; and therefore, from a churchman's point of view, there can be no question of Divorce Reform: he cannot reform a law that he does not acknowledge. It is vital to realise that here we are discussing the laws of England, not the laws of any church English or foreign: in any such discussion the

interpolation of ecclesiastical fads is, in both senses of the term, an impertinence. When Mr Chesterton speaks of ' a most illogical and fanatical appetite for getting married in churches ' he is flinging a legitimate taunt at people who have the impulse, but not the strength of mind, to ignore their church. If the Church says,'Divorced persons may not re-marry,' it is clear that such persons must pursue one of two logical courses. They can either submit, as loyal churchmen, and refrain from marrying, or they can exchange a few polite curses with their church and excommunicate themselves by getting married in a registry. But in a purely secular discussion Mr Chesterton's phrase about getting re-married in churches is irrelevant, and the two or three pages in which he expands his argument are no more than an entertaining digression.

If we consider the institution of marriage as a civil contract, the first thing we notice about it is that, in one most important

respect, it is unlike any other civil contract. We notice further that the point at which it begins to differ from the others is the point at which it begins to be astonishingly silly. For while the State will enforce an ordinary contract against the recalcitrant party, this marriage contract is one that the State will enforce against both parties. And while a case might be made out for the justice of forcing an unwilling husband to fulfil his obligations to his wife, and *vice versa*, it would require all the professors in the Erewhonian Colleges of Unreason to make out a case for obliging two people who had come together in mutual love to remain together in mutual hate. The revolting idiocy of the proceeding may best be emphasised by a parallel. An author and a publisher sign a contract for a book. Some months later the author decides that he does not wish to write the book, and at the same moment, by a happy coincidence, the publisher comes to the conclusion that

he does not wish to publish such a book. Imagine these two lunching together in some quiet little place in Soho in celebration of their common release from a disagreeable duty. While they are toying with the entrée two policemen enter, and arrest them. The author is haled back to his typewriter; he is sternly commanded, in the interests of morality, honour, and the sanctity of the home, to write his book at once; and he is warned that anything he says may be used as evidence against him. The publisher is similarly hustled; and if the two persist in their impiety they are bound over, under severe penalties, never to enter into another contract of the kind. If the author ever dares to write another book he will have to sell it by subterfuge, as if it were obscene; and as for the publisher, he will take to wearing a mask and setting up the type with his own hand and in his own coal cellar.

If this were indeed a true picture of the

law of contracts, that law would be not a whit more ludicrous than the present law of marriage. There is a variety of ways in which a man or a woman may be released from marriage, but in this one obvious way, the way of mutual agreement, they can never be released; if they were to suggest such a thing they would merely subject themselves to a moral nagging from the nearest magistrate or judge. If a woman is unfaithful, she can be divorced; if a man is unfaithful and commits one of two offences (cruelty and desertion), he can be divorced. But if both are unfaithful they are bound, in law, till death them do part. When they put forward their simple plea in a court of justice, the Law will leer at them with a kind of half-witted cunning, and say: 'If you have both kept your marriage vows there is no cause for divorce. Your personal wishes have nothing to do with the matter. You may have married to please yourselves, but now, whether you have children or not,

you have got to remain married to please me. If one of you has broken the marriage vows, the marriage shall be annulled; but if both of you have broken the marriage vows you have done, between you, the one thing that can make your marriage indissoluble. I, the Law, am a very arbitrary as well as a very venerable old fellow, and I declare to you that a sinner can have no rights and suffer no wrongs: only a saint can be sinned against. The husband's sins may be as scarlet, but the wife must be as white as snow: or, her record may be red like crimson, but his must be as empty of evil as my head is of wit.' And this which looks like a travesty is in truth a transcript. It is not a caricature of the law, but a photograph.

Mr Chesterton, fighting for indissoluble marriage, very properly does not concern himself with the particular proposals of the Divorce Reformers, although his book (which appeared serially in *The New Witness*) was provoked by those proposals.

Recently the controversy has been re-opened by Lord Buckmaster, in a letter to *The Times*, to which Lord Hugh Cecil replied. Lord Buckmaster cited numerous cases officially known to him of what he considered to be special hardship: a woman married to a man convicted of an unspeakable offence; a woman infected by her husband with venereal disease; a wife whose husband, in the company of another woman, deserted her, leaving no legal evidence of adultery. All these women, owing to the state of the law that Lord Buckmaster seeks to reform, were unable to obtain release from their marriages. And what of that? Is not suffering the school of character? And are we to countenance an attack on the sanctity of the home merely because a few hundreds or thousands of men and women are shackled together in misery? Not at all. We must not save our faces at the expense of our phrases. Lord Buckmaster wishes to make desertion for

five years a sufficient cause for divorce; and the Royal Commission, over which he presided some few years ago, went even further along the road to ultimate anarchy. Lunacy, habitual drunkenness, marital infidelity—any one of these trivialities was held to be a good reason for severing the bonds of bliss. Does Lord Buckmaster realise what would happen if these recommendations were accepted? Such a revolution in law would constitute a general invitation to licence. Every married couple in the United Kingdom would be cleft asunder. In pursuit of an iniquitous freedom, men who had formerly adored their wives would cultivate habitual drunkenness in the hope of getting quit of them. Devoted women would feign lunacy in order that their husbands might set them free. Thousands of City clerks would fling down their pens and rush away to the Riviera, live there for five years on what they had saved out of fifty shillings a week, and then return, free men, to pursue

their career of love-making and home-breaking. What a vista of wicked possibilities that five-years-desertion clause opens up—one marriage after another, in hot haste, with only five years of celibacy intervening! A woman who married young could have as many as seven husbands in series: an aggregate of seven days of marriage, and thirty-five years spent waiting for the several divorces. Amid this welter of wantonness, what would become of the sanctity of the home, that consolatory phrase? And if Lord Buckmaster fails to see how the sanctity of the home is maintained by tolerating infidelity, cruelty, bestiality, shameful disease in husbands, or drunkenness and permanent lunacy in wives, his failure can only be attributable to wilful blindness. Let us pray for him, that his eyes may be opened.

Lord Buckmaster issued his challenge, and every home trembled for its sanctity. But a day or two later, when all was sin and shame, a second lord to the fight and

to the rescue came. Lord Hugh Cecil's reply was a soothing document, a masterpiece of frigid frivolity. He complained that Lord Buckmaster had not indicated whether, in his belief, marriage was a divine institution or not. And he said: 'It is no use quoting hard cases. It is the law and must be submitted to.' You see at once what a flood of white light this throws on the problem: how it brings health to the venereally-infected wife, peace to the husband of a dipsomaniac, and a balm sweeter than any conjugal bliss to persons of either sex whose partners in matrimony are permanently absent from home. Later still, within the last few weeks, Lord Hugh made another contribution to the discussion, however, and one that contains the substance of the problem's real solution. His very hesitating and tentative proposal, if I understood it aright, was that there should be two forms of sex-alliance: marriage, and legalised unions which should have all the effects of marriage

but not its name. But this proposal—apart from the unmeaning quibble about the name—is already put into effect every time a purely secular marriage takes place ; and the existence of the two forms can be emphasised at any moment by severing Church from State. That is a divorce—the divorce between Church and State—to which many of the most valiant spirits in the Church would heartily assent. We may respect, although we do not share, the convictions of those priests who refuse to marry divorced persons ; and I, for one, have no patience with those persons who wish to remain in a religious communion and partake of its sacraments in the very moment of defying its authority. This, as we have seen, is one of Mr Chesterton's contentions, and it is unanswerable. But it does not in the least affect the case for the increase for divorce facilities. These references to current controversy are not irrelevant, for they aim at reconstructing something of the atmosphere in which, as

a matter of history, Mr Chesterton's book was born.

Having swept aside, and legitimately swept aside, all theological and ecclesiastical red herrings, we may go on to enquire why the civil contract known as marriage should not be, as other contracts are, terminable at the wish of both contracting parties. To that question *The Superstition of Divorce* provides no answer. In a passage in another book, foreshadowing his argument here, Mr Chesterton writes: 'It would not be worth while to bet if a bet were not binding. The dissolution of all contracts would not only ruin morality but spoil sport. . . If I bet I must be made to pay, or there is no poetry in betting. If I challenge I must be made to fight, or there is no poetry in challenging. If I vow to be faithful I must be cursed when I am unfaithful, or there is no fun in vowing.' And he goes on to speak of Christian marriage as something that he would ask of any social paradise: 'I

should ask to be kept to my bargain, to have my oaths and engagements taken seriously; I should ask Utopia to avenge my honour on myself.' If Mr Chesterton asks merely to be cursed when he is unfaithful, there exists already an institution that is only too ready to oblige him, and while he formally acknowledges the authority of that institution I fail to see why he should agitate himself. If his demand means any more than this, it means that he wishes every citizen to be forced, by the conditions of his citizenship, to be a Roman Catholic, at least in respect of marriage: which is precisely as if Baptists were to introduce a bill into Parliament for the Compulsory Total Immersion of all persons who have reached the age of sixteen. 'The shortest way of putting the problem,' he says, in the first of the essays on Divorce, 'is to ask whether being free includes being free to bind oneself. For the vow is a tryst with oneself.' If the vow is a tryst with oneself, why treat

it as if it were a tryst with the policeman? If Mr Chesterton wishes to hire a man to watch over him, and punish him should he fail to fulfil some singular vow, he is entitled to do so. But he is not entitled to demand that the State shall do so: he must make his own private arrangements. I do not understand his employing a priest to enforce the dictates of his conscience, but I respect it; I am still further from understanding his employing a policeman for that purpose, and I do not respect it. All his witticisms about promises and promise-breaking miss the point. Admittedly it is dishonourable to break one's word; frequently it is disastrous, to others besides oneself, to keep it; that is not the point. The important thing to note is that marriage is the only debt of honour that is in any sense enforceable at law, and that enforcing the debt does not save the honour. A woman hustled by fear of penalties into the arms of her husband can hardly be said to be fulfilling her vows:

at best, she is fulfilling them in the letter, which killeth, at the expense of the spirit, which maketh alive. No man (or woman) of spirit would marry a woman (or man) who had to be dragged to the altar by half a dozen officers of the law, no matter how definite the promises that had been exchanged. And no man or woman of spirit would continue to live in marriage with a reluctant partner except in view of ulterior considerations. Is there any distinction between the betrothal vow and the marriage vow? Yes, but it is a distinction that exists only in law, and is necessary only as an economic safeguard. The man undertakes to maintain his wife and children; the woman undertakes not to require him to maintain the children of other men: that is the marriage contract reduced to its simplest terms. If husband and wife mutually agree to release each other there is no sane sentiment or reason for refusing to legalise the agreement. Someone may raise the favourite objection,

'What about the children?' Well, it is obvious that if both parents claim the children their claims must be submitted to the arbitration of the law. But the objector persists. He becomes passionate. He weeps indignant tears at the thought of the pretty little darlings being deprived of their home-life. Very well, let us concede the children: let us concede that the parents must remain married in order that the children may experience the ravishing delights and spiritual edification of living in a household of mutual hatred, with the probability of being made the pawns in a jealous and cruel game. For it is obvious that if children are the crown of a happy marriage they are likely to make an unhappy one still more accursed. To force a man and a woman to live together, parodying marriage, is to heap fuel on their discontent, so that inevitably it kindles to an active mutual loathing or to a passive dislike that is almost worse than loathing. Such people are doomed to

spend their days in the perpetual presence of a corpse, and nowhere will they find a better vent for the resulting nervous anger than in quarrelling about the children of their dead love. Such an existence may or may not be better than loneliness, the cold comfort offered (to those who can pay for it) by the law; it may or may not be better than the social isolation and legal nuisance of an illicit union, which is the only other alternative. That social isolation, says Mr Chesterton, 'is not created by law, and could not be prevented by law'; and therein he says something that is plausible but not, in any but a pedantic sense, true. It is a discreditable fact, but still a fact, that the great mass of democracy has an almost superstitious veneration for the law: it does as a whole, in a confused muddle-headed way, believe the law to be the reflection of some mystical heavenly code. The Deceased Wife's Sister Act has a more than legal validity in the eyes of the average middle-class

man. Wives, whether they have been previously divorced or not, enjoy, I regret to say, a more general esteem than mistresses; and this esteem is partly, though not wholly, induced by law. If indeed the unmarried mother does not suffer legal disabilities, she suffers social disabilities that are directly or indirectly due to the law, in particular to the Law of Bastardy.

But let us return from this digression to consider a second objection certain to be levelled against the proposal that marriage should be a terminable contract. Those who oppose the suggestion will contend that such a law would put a premium on frivolous marrying. That very phrase has been used, and the first retort that rises to one's lips is that if divorce is a reward it is not a very generous reward. One could say with as much truth that the judicial murder of all children born with squints would put a premium on the practice of having children. Imagine two frivolous lovers rushing to the registry

aflame with the hope that they may prove, after marriage, to be sufficiently ill-assorted to experience the rapture of disillusionment and divorce—the picture is pleasant, but perhaps a little fantastic. If this is not what the objection means, what does it mean? Does it mean that people who make mistakes must be forcibly prevented from retrieving their mistakes? Does it mean that having encouraged the frivolous to fall into the fire, we are to attack them hammer and tongs (especially tongs) when they fall out? If it means none of these, if by any chance it means that the proposed reform would provide first aid for the sexual libertine, there is a final and effective reply: which is, that the libertine is perhaps the one man in the world who is totally bored by the controversy about marriage and divorce, for he has no use for either. 'The obvious effect of frivolous divorce,' says Mr Chesterton, 'will be frivolous marriage. If people can be separated for no reason they will feel it all the easier

to be united for no reason.' But neither the marriage nor the divorce could conceivably happen without reason. The people would marry because they wanted to marry; they would separate because they wanted to separate—is there a better reason? On the face of it nothing could be more simple and rational: it is for the opponent of divorce to shew any just cause or impediment why Mr and Mrs Smith, having been at their own request joined together by one legal functionary, should not at their own request be put asunder by another legal functionary. Mr Chesterton expands his argument with characteristic wit. 'A man might quite clearly forsee that a sensual infatuation would be fleeting, and console himself with the knowledge that the connection could be equally fleeting. There seems no particular reason why he should not elaborately calculate that he could stand a particular lady's temper for ten months; or reckon that he would have enjoyed and exhausted

her repertoire of drawing-room songs in two years.' There is, in fact, a very particular reason why an infatuated man could not do this, the reason being, briefly, that he is infatuated. The proposition very elegantly commits suicide as soon as we examine it : its terms cancel out. But waiving this, and conceding the possibility of marriage being abused by lightminded persons (as indeed it already is), let us consider the case of the infatuated gentleman referred to by Mr Chesterton. This Lothario might perhaps welcome the chance of giving his experiments a respectable air ; he might prefer collecting wives in public to making more casual conquests in secret ; I doubt it, but he might. But it is vital to my contention that he would not be able to indulge his hobby without the consent of his victims ; he would not be able to add to his collection so much as one wife, and that a little one, until his first wife had voluntarily released him. The antics of this gentleman really need not

distract our attention from the sad plight of the Mr and Mrs Smith I have mentioned, a matter on which I am genuinely eager to hear Mr Chesterton's ruling.

At this point I am inclined to pause for a reply. But perhaps it will be well to postpone that pause until our survey of this book is either completed or finally abandoned. One or two incidental remarks seem to call for quotation, and certainly that part of the author's argument which is peculiarly his own must, for the sake of fairness, be presented. Speaking for the opponents of divorce he says, 'Divorce is for us at best a failure, of which we are more concerned to find and cure the cause than to complete the effects; and we regard a system that produces many divorces as we do a system that drives men to drown and shoot themselves.' But it is a little grotesque to imply that divorce laws produce divorces: it would be as reasonable to say that white hats produce millers. The miller may, at his initiation

ceremony, don a white hat, but that is the effect not the cause of his being a miller. The unhappily married may get a divorce, but the divorce is the effect not the cause of their unhappiness ; or, to put it another way, the legal divorce is the sign and shadow of the spiritual divorce that has already taken effect in the home. People do not say to each other, in the spirit of picknickers, ' It's a fine day ; let's have a divorce ! ' City clerks do not save money on their lunches or take out endowment policies in the hope that one day they may treat themselves to some costly surgical operation such as amputation. And yet both divorce and the amputation of a leg might, in certain circumstances, be not only a painful necessity but a positive relief. Legal divorce is not a failure : it is the recognition of a failure. Extremists on Mr Chesterton's side who talk about Divorce Reform producing many divorces are confusing a cause with a condition. Divorce Reform would establish conditions

in which more divorces could take place, but it would not be the cause of the divorces. Indeed it is more plausibly contended, by extremists on the other side, that the institution of marriage is itself the cause. That too is a misstatement founded on confusion: a moment's reflection makes it clear that all the happiness and all the miseries of marriage have their causes in the nature of things, particularly in human nature and fallible human judgment. What the law does is to accentuate the hardships in the fond belief that thereby it is safeguarding the happiness: in order that people may find happiness in marriage it places artificial obstacles in the way of relief from unhappiness. I labour the point because even so able a controversialist as Mr Chesterton seems to take it for granted that divorce is an evil in itself, and yet he does not, so far as I know, regard as evil in itself the habit of having bad teeth extracted. He indulges in this pleasing irony at the expense of his opponents:

'The case for divorce combines all the advantages of having it both ways; and of drawing the same deduction from right or left, and from black or white. . . . If there are few examples of divorce, it shows how little divorce need be dreaded; if there are many, it shows how much it is required. The rarity of divorce is an argument in favour of divorce; and the multiplicity of divorce is an argument against marriage.' But the contradiction that he is ridiculing here is more apparent than real, and it depends largely on his cunning use of one word in two senses. If we elucidate the only possible meaning of the paragraph, it becomes both intelligible and incontrovertible. 'If there are few people seeking divorce, it shows how little Divorce Reform need be dreaded; if there are many seeking it in vain it shows how much the reform is required.' This is the plain commonsense that Mr Chesterton is trying to smother by parody. The law gives legal effect to a human relationship,

whether it be the relationship of marriage or of divorce: it does not initiate the relationship. Open the prison door, and the prisoner will run away; but his running away is due not to the opening of the door but to his dislike of being in prison. Marriage becomes a prison as soon as it becomes compulsory. The Englishman's castle is the Englishman's dungeon when he is locked in it from the outside. And it is worth while adding that if the law persists in its practice of locking people up in their own houses there may come a time when men and women will refuse to enter houses; if they are not permitted to marry except on impossible terms, they will form their perfectly natural and honourable alliances without seeking the sanction of the law. If Mr Chesterton wishes to preserve the 'plain, solid, secular and social usefulness' which he attributes to marriage, he should at once change sides on this question of Divorce Reform. I can conceive no more certain way of

hastening the ultimate anarchy called Free Love than by the passing into law of an Indissoluble Marriage Bill.

On certain of the more reckless statements in this reckless book there is no need to waste time: the suggestion that the release of a person married to a lunatic, together with 'larger and looser definitions of lunacy,' would constitute a process that 'might begin by releasing somebody from a homicidal maniac, and end by dealing in the same way with a rather dull conversationalist'; the statement that 'the misfortune of the woman who has married a drunkard may have to be balanced against the misfortune of the man who has married a teetotaller'; the gratuitous assertion that, of divorced couples, 'in most cases one partner will fail to find happiness in an infatuation, and the other will from the first accept a tragedy'; and the statement that just as the old tyrant would turn any number of men out to grass, 'so the new tyrant would turn

any number of women into grass-widows.' This last remark is founded on the totally false assumption that Divorce Reform concerns itself exclusively with the welfare of discontented husbands, and, loth as I am to raise the stale cry of levity, the others I find it difficult to take very seriously. Equally false, and more important, is the remark that the practical proposals about divorce 'suffer from the modern and morbid weakness of always sacrificing the normal to the abnormal.' The error here seems to lie in the entertaining delusion that happily married people are to be torn asunder, that any pair of lovers will, on the flimsiest pretext, be divorced without their own consent. If this did happen it is not difficult to imagine what would follow. First, I fancy, there would be an enthusiastic massacre of lawyers and politicians, a massacre in which both Mr Chesterton and I would take an active part; and, second, there would be an immediate reunion, with or without ceremony,

of the separated lovers. This talk about sacrificing the normal to the abnormal is really very nonsensical, and it staggers belief to find Mr Chesterton indulging in it. The effect of Divorce Reform upon the happily married will be precisely nil; its only effect will be upon the miserably married. Its effect upon the institution of the family will be not destructive but strengthening. Sane marriage laws will not shake the family to its foundations: rather it is they, ultimately, that will save the family from falling.

And the salvation of the family is, it appears, Mr Chesterton's primary purpose, and that suggests to me that I may perhaps have been hasty in supposing, as I did at the beginning of this chapter, that his root objection to divorce was rather a religious dogma than a social conviction. In view of that possibility, and in order not to misrepresent him, I must quote at some length the text itself:

> It is precisely those who have been conservative about the family who have been revolutionary

about the State. Those who are blamed for the bigotry or bourgeois smugness of their marriage conventions are actually those blamed for the restlessness and violence of their political reforms. Nor is there seriously any difficulty in discovering the cause of this. It is simply that in such a society the government, in dealing with the family, deals with something almost as permanent and life-renewing as itself. There can be a continuous family policy, like a continuous foreign policy. In peasant countries the family fights, it may almost be said that the farm fights. I do not mean merely that it riots in evil and exceptional times; though this is not unimportant. . . It is not of such crises of bodily struggle that I speak, but of a steady and peaceful pressure from below of a thousand families upon the framework of government. For this a certain spirit of defence and enclosure is essential; and even feudalism was right in feeling that any such affair of honour must be a family affair. . . . It is found in practice that the domestic citizen can stand a siege, even by the State; because he has those who will stand by him through thick and thin—especially thin. Now those who hold that the State can be made fit to own all and administer all, can consistently disregard this argument; but it may be said with all respect that the world is more and more disregarding them. . . . Most of us, I fancy, are now agreed that something of that social pressure from below which we call freedom is vital to the health of the State; and this it is which cannot be fully exercised by individuals,

> but only by groups and traditions. Such groups have been many; there have been monasteries; there may be guilds; but there is only one type among them which all human beings have a spontaneous and omnipresent inspiration to build for themselves; and this type is the family.

This conception of the family, as a fighting unit which can resist the tyranny of the State, is implicit in another of Mr Chesterton's books. *Eugenics and Other Evils* attempts to prove, by a *reductio ad absurdum* of the contrary proposition, that 'sexual selection, or what Christians call falling in love, is a part of a man which in the rough and in the long run can be trusted.' And in this book, as in the one about divorce, the wicked rich who rule are depicted as whispering and plotting together to divide us, to break up the unit of the family into its component atoms, in order that they may the more wantonly exploit our labour. They wish to deprive men of their last liberty, the liberty of choosing their own wives. The simple scientists, the heredity hunters, are merely

the tools and the dupes of these capitalist cads. It is all very alarming, and makes one's flesh creep damnably, until one emerges from the Lyceum atmosphere of this argument into a more commonsense country. Then one begins gravely to doubt the existence of this plutocratic conspiracy, on the very simple ground that it presupposes more intelligence and far more foresight than plutocrats, as a race, are observed to enjoy. Mr Chesterton flattereth whom he chasteneth. The pretty ways ot the moneygrub are remarkable rather for their simplicity than for their cunning. Cunning he has, but it is not cunning of a very high intellectual order. His method seems to be very much like the methods of those more admirable bandits, Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard: to collar as much money as possible and then sit on it. So singleminded is he in his pursuit of riches that, I suggest, he has no attention to spare for remote political schemes that could not be expected to bear fruit until

the day after tomorrow. He does the thing that's nearest, though it's dull at whiles. It may suit his purpose to get into Parliament, there to fight for his kind against democracy, but I for one find it hard to credit him with so much intelligence, so long a vision, so disinterested a benevolence for his own particular descendants, as would enable him to conceive a far-reaching policy such as Mr Chesterton ascribes to him. But this is a matter of fact, not a matter of either logic or principle, and I am perfectly aware that evidence may be at any moment forthcoming that will prove Mr Chesterton right. Whatever be the motive behind Eugenics, whether it be sordid or (as I believe) sanitary, it certainly deserves all the merciless mockery that Mr Chesterton flings at it in so far as it proposes that people shall marry for the sake of science instead of from sentiment. If it would content itself with a purely negative programme, campaigning against the manifest evil of

propagating disease by the marriage of lunatics, consumptives, and persons similarly afflicted—if it contented itself with this its value could hardly be denied. So one would have thought, but Mr Chesterton will not admit even that much. He will not admit that, in general, diseased people are unhappier than sound people. He uses an argument which, as it seems to me, implies the very apotheosis of scepticism, a doubt of the desirability of physical health. 'The sickness or soundness of a consumptive may be a clear and calculable matter. The happiness or unhappiness of a consumptive is quite another matter, and is not calculable at all. What is the good of telling people that if they marry for love, they may be punished by being the parents of Keats or the parents of Stevenson?' If Mr Chesterton is aware of no connection between health and happiness, why does he when he is ill seek the advice of a doctor? Stevenson may indeed have had 'more red-hot joy

than is given to most men,' and if all consumptives had the genius of a Stevenson the remark might have some relevance. When a consumptive child is born, the odds, at any rate, are against him. His parents in bringing him to birth have in all reasonable probability condemned him to an early death. By this crime Mr Chesterton is unmoved. Compare his attitude here with his attitude to birth-control. He is very angry with some fellow who wrote to a newspaper to say that the spread of destitution will never be stopped until we have educated the lower classes in the methods by which the upper classes prevent procreation. Now I agree that this is a desperate remedy, urged in the first place by Malthus and his friends, in the hope of sidetracking socialism. But a desperate remedy may be desperately necessary, and in any event there are other considerations than economic ones by which the control of birth may be justified. Mr Chesterton refers bitterly to ' the mutilation of woman-

hood, and the massacre of men unborn,' as if in that lurid phrase all contraceptive methods were summed up. This is not the place for a dissertation on the detail of the subject : it is sufficient to say that no informed person will be deceived by the terms of Mr Chesterton's denunciation. If ' massacre of men unborn ' is a legitimate expression in this context, one can as legitimately deplore the massacre of men unborn which is involved in celibacy. On this principle every bachelor shall be marked with the brand of Cain, and every maiden lady share the guilt of Medea. About this highly fanciful massacre of the unborn (who are also unconceived) Mr Chesterton is passionately indignant. But about the prospects of those less lucky ones who are to be born consumptives he is gay, almost hilarious. He has tears to spare for the children who have never existed and never will exist, but to those about to be born to a heritage of disease and suffering he has nothing to offer but a pretty paragraph about Stevenson.

IV THE ETERNAL HIEROGLYPH

A philosopher must be faithful to Truth even when she is old and ill-favoured; and a critic must be faithful to truths even when they happen to be truisms. The result, often, is a dullness of statement that is wearisome to the reader but a salutary scourge for the vanity of the writer. The more ingenious among honest journalists contrive to give to their commonplaces the air of novelty by presenting them in the form of paradox or epigram. Passionately serious men like Shaw and Chesterton would seem dull indeed to 'the endless bun-eating, ball-throwing animal that we have all been,' if their manners were not so entertaining; for what they have to say is for the most part either the plainest commonsense or the starkest nonsense. It has been frequently urged against Bernard Shaw's plays that they contain no live characters

but only embodiments of varous intellectual attitudes that interest the author; and one has to confess that even the frequency of the criticism, its endless parrot-iteration by idiots, does not make it entirely untrue. Mr Shaw is in fact a creative as well as a critical genius, but Shaw the creator has to watch his chance of stealing a march on Shaw the preacher, just as the creative genius of Bunyan could only find its clearest expression when the allegorist was beginning to nod. In Bernard Shaw the creative artist is couchant, the preacher is rampant: that is why it is fashionable among those who dislike his preaching to say that he is not an artist at all. The same, with certain qualifications, may be said of Chesterton; but the qualifications are perhaps more important than the proposition. It would be idle to deny that Chesterton is an artist; but certainly he is not a great artist, and he is not a creator at all in the sense in which Dickens, for example, is a creator.

I do not mean merely that the characters in his fiction have not the amazing vitality of Micawber and Mantalini; for of whom could that not be said? I mean that they are not alive at all; they do not deceive us into believing in their existence. Perhaps an exception to this sweeping statement may be found here and there, and perhaps one of the exceptions is Humphrey Pump, the master of The Flying Inn, and Father Brown another; but the statement is as true as a generalisation can be. When they are not shadowy protagonists in a kind of Greek dialogue about religion, or kindred subjects, they are remote allegorical figures. To take a superficial example first, because being superficial it is the first to strike the eye: all Chesterton's people talk in Chesterton's own peculiar idiom. The mystic who is always right, the agnostic doctor who is always wrong, the solid stolid business man who is always woodenheaded, the French peasant who is always admirable—all these

stock characters of Chesterton's fiction have one remarkable gift in common: they all employ in their speech the literary style of the author of *Orthodoxy*. It gives colour to the idea that Chesterton is dominated by his own tricks, to find that even in fiction, for the purpose of inducing the necessary illusion of verisimilitude, he has the greatest difficulty in abandoning them. This is what makes it possible for anthologists to present the sayings of the characters in these stories as if they were the direct speech of the author. If you are compiling a little book called 'Chips from Chesterton,' you can quote the remark: 'Modern journalism consists in saying Lord Jones Dead to people who didn't know that Lord Jones was alive.' You can quote this with perfect propriety although in fact it came, not from Chesterton direct, but from one of the people in the Father Brown stories. Indeed it is sometimes safer to quote the speeches, for you thereby avoid the error of the anthologist who solemnly presented

as a characteristic Chestertonism, 'Many waters cannot quench love,' an aphorism which an older school of literary criticism had been in the habit of attributing to the author of *The Song of Songs*. It is possible that Chesterton could write fiction of the first order if he chose to do so. But up to now he has not chosen to do so; for the very life of fiction consists in the life of its characters. He has written excellent puzzles, the detective tales; he has written clever and vastly entertaining masques, the fantastic romances; but he has not added any characters to the world of English fiction. Time and again he has produced dramatised versions of *Orthodoxy*: in fact it would be broadly true to sum up the whole of his activity as a storyteller in that statement. This is the truth about his philosophical fantasies, as I see it, his *Ball and the Cross*, his *Manalive*, and the rest: they are graphic illustrations of a thesis or of theses. From a literary point of view nearly all his novels suffer from the

taint of allegory. That phrase may provoke opposition, or it may be regarded as a compliment in disguise. It may be supposed that I am arguing for the aesthetic or unmoral view of art, in its most uncompromising form. But the supposition is quite the reverse of the truth. My contention is rather that Chesterton's novels lack the profound significance of great fiction because they aim so consistently at a didactic significance. They do not touch the emotions because their appeal is exclusively to the intellect. The author's intention is undoubtedly to effect a change of heart as well as a clearing of the head, but he is not able to perform the miracle by which greater artists achieve that tremendous purpose. He can very cleverly describe emotion, but he cannot communicate it. We may say, borrowing a current criticism of Wagner, that he is too cerebral. But that hardly reaches the root of the matter, for it is not a positive quality, but the lack of some positive quality, that

is the cause of his failure to stir the depths in us. His novels, with their riot of too facile description, are pools upon whose shining surface the colours of the sky are mirrored; but they are shallow pools into which one cannot plunge and be overwhelmed by great waters. All his ecstasies affect one as being symptoms of an intellectual excitement; all his storms, even when they are said to shake the earth, are storms in a teacup. For these reasons I find it difficult to believe that the novels will survive far beyond the present generation, except perhaps as the *tours de force* of a controversial essayist. And there is the evidence of his public statements to shew that at least one very shrewd literary critic shares this literary opinion, in so far as it is unfavourable. He is a critic whose utterances carry far more weight than mine, and his name is G. K. Chesterton.

But I have still to shew that my objection to allegory is not an objection to ethical significance but something that

proceeds from considerations purely literary. The word allegory, like the word God and like so many other words, is commonly used without any clear idea of its meaning. In common speech it has one or both of two meanings, and between the two meanings there is an immense and immensely important difference: the one stands at the beginning of literature, the other at the end. The one is literature in its infancy: the other is literature in its glorious maturity. The one presents abstract things in the thin disguise of human beings: the other reaches the universal by fidelity to the particular. It can be put shortly and crudely by saying that you may teach mankind a great truth if you are content to tell it a good story; whereas if you try to teach it a great truth you will probably succeed only in telling it a poor story. This pretends to no sort of logical certainty: it is simply a rough statement of what generally happens. And I cannot apologise for this riot of platitude,

because even platitudes may help to destroy popular fallacies, and this essay is not written for the entertainment of people who know everything.

If by peering back through innumerable centuries we could descry the form and features of the father of the world's literature, I fancy we should see a gross hairy monster swinging by its tail from a tree rather than a being we would readily elect president of the Authors' Club. The first creature, human or sub-human, to conceive the idea of communicating with his kind, of bridging the profound gulf of silence that separates one soul from another, initiated the literary epoch, launched the first attack upon the impregnable tower of individual isolation. In him flamed the primal impulse to human speech, and so to literature. Allegory was the first conscious literary artifice, but literature itself begins and ends in symbolism. In the dim beginnings of society, when speech was mainly onomatopoeic and writing a pictorial art,

the idea 'dog' was communicated to the ear by a bark, to the eye by linear curves scratched by an eager toenail on the cave-wall or the earth's surface. And here, the very dog of very dog being neither a bark nor a curved line, was the origin both of symbolism and of artistic convention. Words, these everyday symbols, have now for the most part lost their imitative element, though not wholly. We do not now call a bishop by his characteristic noise: we call him just bishop. And we write him, not by a hieroglyphic suggesting corpulence and gaiters, but by an arbitrary arrangement of arbitrary shapes. None the less, literature sprang, and springs, from the instinct to make a visible picture of the unseen idea. Simple folk believe their eyes more readily than their ears: the visible Christ wrought in silver, or in colours, or even impersonated by a priest, is more real to them than is the tragic figure of the crucifixion story. This the mediæval church, with its miracle plays,

clearly recognised ; and surviving churches, the Roman with its crucifixes, the Greek with its ikons, recognise it still. Narration is not enough : we crave picture or drama. And allegory, which gives abstractions a form, is a step in the direction of drama—the first step, and therefore the one taken by an infant literature. An allegory is a story told for children by children. Its end is instruction rather than delight ; and only when it is allegorically defective does it not suffer from an excessive simplification. A good allegory cannot be a good story : at best it can be a good sermon. There can be in it no surprise, no incalculable human element. The persons of allegorical drama are persons only in the Latin sense. They are masks, and they are masks that conceal, not a human face, but vacancy. They are pasteboard figures with labels on their backs. Complexity is excluded by hypothesis ; and subtlety can creep in only by stealth, when the author forgets himself. Not only must Chastity

be chaste : she must take care to be chaste and nothing else. She must not be beautiful, for that is Beauty's privilege ; she must not be courageous, or Courage will be out of work. Allegory diluted with poetry or with humour may not be unpleasant, but taken neat it is as purely medicinal as a dose of quinine. Chaucer did not find his real strength until, having sown his poetical wild oats, he turned from allegory to write, in the Prologue and interprologues of *The Canterbury Tales*, the first English novel. Spenser owes his place in our literature to his verbal music, not to his Guyons and Britomarts and Calidores. And Bunyan, whom we are accustomed to call the author of our greatest allegory, was a master in spite of himself. It is true that he called his people Christian, Faithful, Hopeful, but it is noteworthy that at least he did not call them Christianity, Faith, Hope. Even with these names they would have remained human ; for no name could have made Prudence, receiving the foot-sore

pilgrim, anything less than exquisitely human; no name could have made her merely Prudence. 'So she smiled, but the water stood in her eyes: and after a little pause. . . .'

But, having said that allegory is told to children by children, I do not wish to suggest that in this degree Mr Chesterton's novels are allegorical. For one thing, his allegory is never undiluted. I suggest only that a strong allegorical element does often exist in them, and that the allegory is of the lower, or arbitrary, kind. He seems to begin soberly enough, with the definite intention of telling us a story, but the multitude of bees in his bonnet will not let him rest at that. More and more, as the story advances, he abandons fiction in favour of his old trade of essayist, and finally, in a kind of frenzy, he sets light to the whole reasonable structure so that it goes up in allegorical smoke and flame. *The Ball and the Cross*, a tale that goes steadily madder and madder,

provides a good example of this frantic method; and *The Flying Inn*, that feast of good fun, provides another. Nearly always, in his last chapter, Chesterton tries to cram more significance into his persons than the poor things can hold. The more they swell, the more allegorical they become, the less are we able to believe in them or their story. If they would only consent to move modestly out of the story we might stretch a point and politely pretend to believe in their existence. But instead of thus losing their lives to save them they behave in the most arrogant way. They dress up in monstrous colours; they rush about, fighting, feasting, spouting Chesterton by the page; Christendom is lost in one paragraph and saved again (by a battle in Cornwall) in the next—until the exasperated reader puts an end to the whole extravagant phantasmagoria by throwing the book out of the window. Chesterton wishes to make his men into gods, but he forgets in his eagerness that

he must first make them into men. And that (as Chesterton himself might say) is not an idle flippancy, for indeed it is by making his characters human that a great creative artist makes them superhuman. It is the function of art to make visible the unseen idea, its triumph to express the abstract in terms of the concrete, its crowning miracle to awake in us, by fidelity to the particular, a sense of the universal. First allegory, then fiction, and finally a higher allegory, or symbolism (or what you will), in which didacticism is infinitely sublimated—this is the order of literary evolution. Sir Willoughby Patterne is embodied egoism, our own egoism, without ceasing to be Sir Willoughby Patterne of Patterne, complete with hat and boots. Never were persons of a drama more urgent with life than were King Lear and the members of his house. Yet Goneril is incarnate cruelty, and Regan malicious craft, no less than Cordelia is the charity that suffers long and

is kind. And Lear, so personal, so violently himself, is also universal; for in his voice not he alone, but all wronged fatherhood, all insulted kingship, achieves utterance. I do not believe the most ardent admirer of Chesterton will contend that his puppets have even a spark of this universal significance, and if that is admitted it is admitted also that he would have done better to content himself with telling a plain story well instead of straining after an impossible symbolism. Two or three of the books that I have in mind might be used to point some Chestertonian maxim to the effect that we can only find freedom by binding ourselves with law. Central in his creed is the conviction that anarchy is the very reverse of liberation because anarchy means ultimate inaction; and, by an ironic coincidence, literary anarchy is nowhere better exemplified than in parts of his own novels. If we are equally free to move in all directions we end by standing still; if, in writing fiction,

we submit to no laws of possibility or probability the result is likely to be a chaos of mixed methods. In Chesterton's fiction realism and fantasy are muddled together rather than blended. We begin with exciting natural events and end, too often, with a dull supernatural apocalypse. It is like listening to music in which the key and the tempo are incessantly changing, or like reading one of those exasperating American poems in which lines of grave dignity and strict metre are intermixed with scraps of jerky prose. To Mr. Chesterton's favourite examples of a paralysing anarchy, free love and free verse, a third must be added, free fiction. But here I am in danger of being misunderstood. I am not attempting to do anything so absurd as impose external rules on art, and it would be base ingratitude in me did I deny that I have derived much joy from Mr Chesterton's fictional frolics. My contention is that though it may be possible to produce a satisfactory blend of the modern

novel and the fairy tale, Mr Chesterton has not succeeded in doing so; and that though the frolics are very jolly frolics they are not good fiction, or, to be more precise, they are not fiction of the first order. It should be added that this is a very general criticism, which may possibly be modified in some of its details in the more particular review that is to follow. Some hint of the standard assumed in that phrase, 'the first order,' may be inferred from this remark: many of Chesterton's short stories appeared first in popular magazines, and all their faults did not prevent their being, in every respect, a hundred times better than any of the stories that rubbed shoulders with them. Those who have gauged the literary quality of magazine fiction in England will agree that the compliment is a very sober and restrained one.

The first of the romances to appear was *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, which burst into our sky, like a new and many-coloured star, in 1904; it was the first and, I am

inclined to think, it remains the best. Perhaps more treasures of wit and fantasy were lavished upon it than upon the others, and at the same time more care seems to have gone to its construction. In form and structure it is altogether less loose and flimsy than some of its successors. And if anyone protests that this prattle about form is idle in a consideration of books so prodigal in riches, that is a point of view which has my warm sympathy even though I disagree with it. If you cry, ' Let us enjoy the admitted splendours of these books. Let us decorate our memory with their jewels of fancy. Let us sip with enthusiasm the wine of their irony. And fiddlesticks take your pedantic theorising about form ! '—if you say this I can only reply, mildly enough, that though I do not make the mistake of identifying the bottle with the wine, the shape of the bottle is not altogether a matter of indifference. It is easier, for example, to pour wine from a conventional bottle than from a

cluster of glass tubes shaped like a chandelier.

This first and best of the romances begins with a chapter that is a masterpiece of irony. It concerns the habit of prophecy so prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century, eighty years before the story opens; and the temptation to quote the whole of it is hardly to be resisted. But it must be resisted.

> The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it to the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up. And one of the games to which it is most attached is called, Keep To-morrow Dark, and which is also named (by the rustics in Shropshire, I have no doubt) Cheat the Prophet. The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun.

Apart from the curious syntax in the second period of that paragraph, has

any book since *Northanger Abbey* opened more auspiciously? (You will remember the description of Catherine Morland's father: 'Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome.') Reading on, we discover that the people of our generation play their game of Cheat the Prophet with signal success, in spite of the difficulty created by the fact that all the prophecies neatly cancel out. The one thing not predicted was the one thing that happened, for the London of the twenty first century proves to be almost exactly like the London of to-day. The people having lost their faith in revolutions, having substituted for their belief in the efficacy of effort a trust in a kind of automatic evolution, all changes are slow and unimportant. For the purposes of the story the most important of these trivial changes is the displacement of the hereditary principle of monarchy by

a system of choice similar to the method by which, in our own time, jurymen are selected. We are made acquainted with this constitutional change by the very neat device of a conversation between James Barker, a civil servant, and the ex-president of Nicaragua, the last republic to be assimilated by the hegemony of Europe. 'The situation invites paradox,' says Barker :

> 'We are, in a sense, the purest democracy. We have become a despotism. Have you not noticed how continually in history democracy becomes despotism? People call it the decay of democracy. It is simply its fulfilment. Why take the trouble to number and register and enfranchise all the innumerable John Robinsons, when you can take one John Robinson with the same intellect or lack of intellect as all the rest, and have done with it? All that we want for Government is a man not criminal and insane, who can rapidly look over some petitions and sign some proclamations.'

A few days after this conversation, we find Barker walking in Kensington Gardens with two friends, a dull fellow named Lambert and a witty fellow named

Auberon Quin. Quin is a small, dandified imp of a man, whose sole joy in life consists in savouring its absurdity. At the crisis of his fantastic mirth the three friends are approached by a state official, come to announce the selection of the King of England, for it is the rule, inherited from the old *regime*, that the news should be brought to the new sovereign immediately wherever he is. The official's arrival causes considerable embarrassment to two of the friends, but none at all to the third. And it is upon the third, Auberon Quin, the epicure in nonsense, that the choice has fallen. At the moment, as the officer drily remarks, he seems to be occupied. He is, in fact, occupied in standing on his head, in answer to some chance sally; and it is while still in that unusual position that he makes his first speech as King of England: 'I am not worthy. I cannot reasonably claim to equal the great men who have previously swayed the sceptre of Britain. Perhaps the only peculiarity that

I can claim is that I am probably the first monarch that ever spoke out his soul to the people of England with his head and body in this position.' King Auberon's first exercise of royal authority takes the form of a Charter of the Cities by which all the boroughs of London are invested with a new dignity. ' Hammersmith, Kensington, Bayswater, Chelsea, Battersea, Clapham, Balham, and a hundred others—each shall immediately build a city wall with gates to be closed at sunset. Each shall have a city guard, armed to the teeth. Each shall have a banner, a coat-of-arms, and, if convenient, a gathering cry.' On the details of this elaborate scheme Chesterton broods with delightful and dazzling folly. The whole affair is conceived and carried out in a very ecstasy of nonsense, high jinks *in excelsis*. The various interviews between the urbane Auberon and the dull respectable tradesmen, provosts of their cities, who fail to enjoy the joke, are the most joyous comedy imaginable. All,

except the king himself, fail to enjoy the joke; but when some years have passed there rises to eminence a young man who does not even realise that it *is* a joke. He is Adam Wayne, Provost of Notting Hill, and he sets half London by the ears by refusing to sell Pump Street, which remains the last obstacle to the fulfilment of a great road-project dear to the hearts of his neighbour provosts. He claims the rights of his charter, defies his enemies, and then, for the first time within living memory, there is war in the civilised world, war in England. Twice is Pump Street attacked; and twice are the attacking hordes defeated by a fourth of their number. In the heat of a third battle Adam Wayne captures the water-tower on Campden Hill and forces all his enemies to surrender by threatening to flood the valley in which they are massed, awaiting his own capitulation. The story of this little war is a splendid and exciting story, and it has an air of plausibility that Chesterton sometimes fails to impart to

his improbable events. This is important. Even though the events of a story be wildly improbable, or flatly impossible (if anything can be that), it does not follow that they are incredible. The first four books of the *Napoleon of Notting Hill* carry conviction. In the fifth book the curtain rises on an England dominated by the spirit, the flaming vision, of Adam Wayne. Tradesmen who in the old days had been humdrum commercial men, each with his heart locked up in a cashbox, are now mystics, burning with local patriotism, their imaginations tingling with all the rich associations of the wares they sell. All the little shopkeepers have become, in a sense, minor poets. This is all very well, and I for one am inclined to wish that the author had left it at that. Any symbolic or spiritual meaning that the story possesses might, one feels, have been left to dawn naturally in the mind of the reader by virtue of its own power and glory. It is disconcerting to watch an author append

his allegory with the deliberation of one affixing a postage stamp to a letter. But Mr Chesterton is not to be done out of his dearest indulgence, the apocalyptic finale. Adam Wayne, now old and venerable, is forced once more into the field to fight his enemies, who are now inflamed with a patriotic fervour equal to his own. There is a furious battle in which all the combatants are killed except the King and Wayne himself. These two must survive in order that, in the last chapter, they may hand to us the moral of the story, as on a plate. 'You and I, Auberon Quin,' says Adam Wayne, 'have both of us been again and again called mad. And we are mad. We are mad, because we are not two men but one man. We are mad, because we are two lobes of the same brain, and that brain has been cloven in two. And if you ask for the proof of it, it is not hard to find. It is not merely that you, the humorist, have been in these dark days stripped of the joy of gravity. It is not merely that I,

the fanatic, have had to grope without humour. It is that though we seem to be opposite in everything, we have been opposite like man and woman, aiming at the same moment at the same practical thing. . . . When dark and dreary days come, you and I are necessary, the pure fanatic, the pure satirist.'

I pass over the amusing but machine-made mysteries of *The Club of Queer Trades* (1905) and glance but for a moment at *The Man Who Was Thursday*, which followed in 1908. Here I am confronted by a difficulty: which is that if I give a detailed account of this extravaganza I shall destroy more than half its interest for those who have not yet read it. It is a story, full of wild events, which one may with perfect accuracy and politeness call a nightmare, for that is what the author himself calls it. It is an allegory, too, no doubt, but the first philosophical inference that it would occur to me to draw from the story is that all our human strife between good and evil

is an unmeaning mummery. I do not suppose that to be Mr Chesterton's view.

In *The Ball and the Cross*, which appeared in 1910, the author again followed the fashion he had set himself in his first work of fiction, the fashion of straining himself and exasperating the reader by going pop in the last chapter. There are plenty of names in this book, but there are few if any real people. Turnbull the atheist and MacIan the mystic, the two central characters, are substantial enough for the purposes of light fiction, but they are constantly trying to dissipate their substance by arguments that might have been (and, for all I know, have been) taken straight out of *Orthodoxy*. The arguments can be admired and enjoyed, but they cannot be said to make for that temporary credibility which is necessary to all fiction, however light. One can believe readily enough that these two religious antagonists were constantly arguing, but it is a strain to try to believe that they were constantly

talking like a book (as the saying is) and, moreover, like another book by the same author. The mechanism of the plot is simple. These two men, the only people in the world who believe in the importance of religion, are bent on fighting to the death: the police are equally bent on preventing their doing so. The whole thing resolves itself into a wild chase across England. Again and again the duellists draw their swords upon each other and are frustrated at the last moment by the arrival of their enemies the representatives of law and order and religious indifference; again and again they run off together, sword in hand, and elude their pursuers. In the course of their adventures they naturally become comrades and close friends. They fall in with two impossible figments of Chesterton's fancy, an idiot of a peacemaker who talks a travesty of Tolstoy, and 'the other philosopher,' a man whose mania is slaughter. Finally they are entrapped in a lunatic asylum,

in which, as in time they discover, all the other decent characters in the story are also incarcerated. In order that these two dangerous because religious men may be silenced, and the story of their heroic folly suppressed, the powers of evil that rule England have resorted to ' wider and looser definitions of insanity ' by means of which they are able to imprison not only the duellists but all who have had any personal contact with them since the beginning of the escapade. The whole conspiracy, one is led to infer, has been engineered by Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, a potentate whom we found in the first chapter sailing the air with a venerable mystical monk called Father Michael. In a fit of spleen provoked by his defeat in argument, Lucifer flung Michael out of the airship on to the great ball of St Paul's. By clinging to the cross, and keeping his head, the monk was able at length to escape from this allegorical but perilous height, and at the end of the story we find him, with all the rest, in the

asylum. A good Frenchman, by setting the place of fire, terrifies into flight the villainous mad doctors, and Michael turns up at the last moment to play providence. He miraculously cleaves the fire in twain; and down the resulting path all the good people in the story escape unscathed.

Manalive, which followed in 1912, is both shorter and better, and it is possible that the connection between the two adjectives may not be entirely accidental. Here, let me admit with some haste and emphasis, the allegorical trick does more or less come off, and it comes off without pulling a ruined story with it. Whether because an air of convincing actuality is maintained throughout all the improbable events, whether because the author has kept his riotous fancy under decent control and presented tolerably human men and women—whether for these reasons or for another, Innocent Smith does succeed in being a symbol without becoming a wraith. He bounds over the garden wall of Beacon House, preceded,

perhaps heralded, by a great gale; and he infects the disenchanted inmates of that dull boarding establishment with the crazy sense that it is everybody's birthday. The description of the wind is a fine example of Chestertonian exuberance. It begins with the first words in the story:

> A wind sprang high in the west, like a wave of unreasonable happiness, and tore eastward across England, trailing with it the frosty scent of forests and the cold intoxication of the sea. In a million holes and corners it refreshed a man like a flagon, and astonished him like a blow. In the inmost chambers of intricate and embowered houses it woke like a domestic explosion, littering the floor with some professor's papers till they seemed as precious as fugitive, or blowing out the candle by which a boy read *Treasure Island* and wrapping him in roaring dark. But everywhere it bore drama into undramatic lives, and carried the trump of crisis across the world. Many a harassed mother in a mean backyard had looked at five dwarfish shirts on the clothesline as at some small, sick tragedy; it was as if she had hanged her five children. The wind came, and they were full and kicking as if five fat imps had sprung into them. . . . . The bright short grass lay all one way like brushed hair. Every shrub in the garden tugged at its roots like a dog at the collar, and strained

> every leaping leaf after the hunting and exterminating element. . . . The three men stood stiffly and aslant against the wind, as if leaning against a wall.

Innocent Smith combines the mischievousness of Puck with the innocence of Peter Pan. By his sheer irresponsibility and high spirits he cleanses the social atmosphere of its megrims. Two couples in Beacon House who have been hitherto too timid or too tired for the adventure of love now take sudden courage. Smith indeed is like the fierce and wholesome wind that came with him, and he cleanses that dark house of its spiritual cobwebs. No sooner has everybody begun to like him, or at least to tolerate him as a harmless eccentric, than he engages himself to Mary Gray, one of the residents, and proposes to take her at once to his aunt's and then procure a special marriage licence. The young heiress, Rosamund Hunt, to whom Mary is some sort of companion, immediately telegraphs to a Dr Warner that Smith is a

lunatic and is doing terrible things. A few moments afterwards she herself, carried away by a gust of impetuous sanity, betrothes herself to Michael Moon, an Irish journalist who has been hanging round her vaguely for years, and who is the only person in the story who really understands Innocent Smith. When Dr Warner arrives, with Cyrus Pym, a renowned American criminologist and specialist in lunacy, he finds that Rosamund has turned Smith's advocate. They argue at some length, but Smith finally settles the matter by putting two revolver bullets through the doctor's silk hat. Michael Moon insists that Smith must be tried in private, by themselves, and invokes the authority of the High Court of Beacon, an institution he had himself invented, in a moment of levity, some days before. Accordingly Smith stands his trial on four charges urged against him by Dr Cyrus Pym. Moon acts as counsel for the defence. The prisoner is accused of murder, burglary,

desertion, polygamy ; and the trial is a very diverting performance. Dr Cyrus Pym, with his habit of closing his eyes in an access of courteous modesty, is excellent. He has a trick of pausing, when a word eludes him, and seeming to catch it between his forefinger and thumb, as if it were a butterfly : it is a trick that never fails to entertain us. His flowers of oratory, too, are very delightful, and provide Moon with a chance for amusing parody. The prisoner is acquitted on all counts. He fired at the Warden of his college in order to cure that gentleman of pessimism ; he entered a house through the roof because it was his own house and it pleased him to enter it in that way ; he ran away from his wife and children in order that he might come back with a renewed sense of their value ; and as for the several elopements, they were all with the same girl, for he made a practice of leaving his wife about, an apparently unattached maiden, so that he might experience the romantic excitement of

wooing and winning her anew. Wherever he went he left a trail of happiness behind him. Out of the mouth of his revolver he dealt not death but life. 'His principle,' explains his counsel, Michael Moon, 'can be quite simply stated: he refuses to die while he is still alive. He seeks to remind himself, by every electric shock to the intellect, that he is still a man alive, walking on two legs about the world. . . . This man's spiritual power has been precisely this, that he has distinguished between custom and creed.'

In the years that intervened between *The Ball and the Cross* and *Manalive* Mr Chesterton had written a series of detective stories. Now the detective story is a unique and delightful phenomenon in literature, constituting a class in itself. It is a great literary game rather than a contribution to literature, and a game is no fun at all unless it is played according to the rules. There is no sense in playing chess with a man whose

pawns leap about the board in the manner of a knight ; there is no sense in playing cricket with a man who insists on constructing a barbed wire entanglement round his wicket. And there is no enjoyment in reading a detective story that is tainted by miracles. One of the rules of the detective story game is that the supernatural be rigidly excluded from taking a hand in the plot. The author's game is to puzzle the reader, and the reader's game is to read the puzzle ; and, the reader being manifestly handicapped, it is a point of honour with his opponent not to press an advantage too closely. This duel of wits is unique among games in that the man against whom the odds are loaded is as eager to be defeated as is the other man to defeat him. The author is at such an immense advantage that he can afford to despise the dishonest trick of supernaturalism, and if he has a sense of fairplay he will despise equally the cheap and nasty expedient of sustaining his mystery by

withholding all the evidence. All these things Mr Chesterton knows well enough, and many of his Father Brown stories (1911 and 1914), and one or two of the stories in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1922), are first-rate. There is also the consideration—a counsel of perfection rather than a rule—that the more natural, the more probable is the explanation of the mystery, the better is the tale ; and here, one must confess, Mr Chesterton's work is open to criticism. But my immediate purpose is not to criticise the detective stories but to point out that in writing them the author had to submit to a wholesome discipline : he was bound, by the rules of the game. to exclude the miraculous, and he had small chance of allegorising. Is it fanciful to suggest that the reward of this discipline is to be seen in the restraint with which *Manalive* is conceived, compared with the anarchic extravagance of *The Ball and the Cross ?*

The Flying Inn (1914), the latest of the

novels, is a delightful and a desolating book: delightful for its wit and humour, desolating because it fills one with a sense of a great opportunity missed. One feels that if only the author had been able to subdue his more irritating idiosyncrasies, if only he had worked with more care, and in a manner more leisurely, he might have made, with the material squandered in this book, a piece of literature rich, homely, ample with the amplitude of an Essex landscape, warm with the sunshine of an English summer (what there is of it); he might have made a prose epic, embodiment of the comic spirit, a picaresque novel that should follow the great tradition of Fielding and Dickens. It is as idle, no doubt, to complain that Chesterton did not write like Fielding as it would be to accuse Whitman of not cultivating the elegant manner of Tennyson; and yet, as I read his book, I am haunted and troubled by intimations —intimations of immortality, they might almost be called—of the far better book

that it might have been. I could enjoy the rich English humours of Humphrey Pump so much better if I were not from time to time hustled away to listen to the comical but sometimes sledgehammer satire of sundry dull modern freaks of pseudo-philosophy. Everybody by this time knows the outline of the story, just as everybody knows almost by heart the excellent songs by which the festive wanderers enliven their journeys. Nothing could be better, in its own way, than the song against grocers, by Humphrey Pump, 'sole Proprietor of the Old Ship, Pebbleswick. Good Accommodation for Man and Beast. Celebrated as the House at which both Queen Charlotte and Jonathan Wilde put up on different occasions; and where the chimpanzee man was mistaken for Bonaparte. This song is written against Grocers':

God made the wicked Grocer
For a mystery and a sign,
That men might shun the awful shops
And go to inns to dine;

Where the bacon's on the rafter
And the wine is in the wood,
And God that made good laughter
Has seen that they are good.

The evil-hearted Grocer
Would call his mother ' Ma'am,'
And bow at her and bob at her
Her aged soul to damn,
And rub his horrid hands and ask
What article was next,
Though *mortis in articulo*
Should be her proper text.*

And so on, in a crescendo of comedy.

The story is set in some evil future when the spirit of prohibition, incarnated in a certain Lord Ivywood, dominates England. The old inns are suppressed; only one or two city saloons are retained, for the convenience of the ruling classes. It is proclaimed by statute that alcoholic drink must not be sold except in places where an inn sign has been permitted to remain. Taking advantage of the letter of the law,

* From *The Flying Inn* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

Humphrey Pump and his Irish friend Patrick Dalroy run off together carrying with them a cheese, a keg of rum, and the sign of The Old Ship. This sign they erect whenever an opportunity presents itself, and so, without breaking the law, issue their rum to appreciative rustics. What an admirable scheme for a fine roystering novel, full of the humours of the English countryside! And how unwelcome the chapters that drag us away from the flying innkeepers to observe the parody of modern journalism that Mr Hibbs presents, or to witness the solemn fooleries of Lord Ivywood and his spiritual father the mad Turk! The wandering revellers find a refuge from pursuit in a deserted part of Lord Ivywood's estate, approached by a secret underground tunnel, and to their camp strays Lord Ivywood's dog Quoodle. Quoodle becomes one of their company, and this beast is more convincingly portrayed than many of the minor human characters. It is for him that Pump writes

what is probably the most realistic as well as the funniest of doggy songs :

> They haven't got no noses,
> The fallen sons of Eve ;
> Even the smell of roses
> Is not what they supposes ;
> But more than mind discloses
> And more than men believe.*

Humphrey Pump is indeed, as has already been hinted, the most alive of all Chesterton's people, the only one of them who goes on existing after the book has been closed ; and it is perhaps his genial presence that makes this story of the Flying Inn more genuinely human than any other long story by the same author.

Here ends my rough summary of Mr Chesterton's clever but ephemeral fiction. He uses fiction, as he uses every literary form, as a vehicle for propaganda, and — which is important — *primarily* as a vehicle for propaganda. Rarely indeed does the artist in him gain

* From *The Flying Inn* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

control over the controversialist; and, this being so, no one can be surprised that he has failed to add a work of enduring value to the roll of English fiction. In a sense he has not failed, because he has not tried. For all his passion for humanity, his enthusiasm for 'the sublime vulgarity of man,' he has invented scores of talking machines, scores of bodiless names, and only one Humphrey Pump. He has nothing of the fertile creativeness of Mr Wells, whose *History of Mr Polly* is worth, as fiction, all the novels put together that we have been considering here. For all his lust for allegory, or perhaps because of it, his allegories lack power; because, by a paradox that he will appreciate, fictitious characters that are not content to be themselves can never succeed in being anything else.

But one need not make much of the fact that Mr Chesterton has failed where only the very greatest, by sheer force of their creative genius, have succeeded.

There are immortal creatures in our literature who become, merely by being abundantly themselves, vast symbols; and one or two of them I have named earlier in this chapter. And, arguing from the greater to the less, the notion inevitably suggests itself that perhaps we beings of a lower order of existence, mere flesh and blood having no such secure tenure of life, may ourselves be parts of a universal hieroglyphic. On such a hypothesis it were manifestly better for a novelist to present us as, to his clearest vision, we are, without attempting to twist us into the shape of some lesser, more trivial allegory. If, choosing to see meaning in all things, we are asked the meaning of a sunset, there is only one possible answer, and that is no answer at all—to point to the sunset. The significance of the sunset (supposing it to have any) is written in the sunset, and even though it be apprehended it cannot be adequately translated. There is, no doubt, a comical incongruity in attributing

meaning to the sum of man's pigmy activities. Are we, because we happen to be the commas or dots in a cosmic poem, to be so puffed up? Must we not rather reflect, summoning our sense of proportion, that if the Anonymous Poet with careless thumb had smeared out all life as we know or conjecture it, from its first birth in the waters to the ultimate crash of stars and suns, there would have been only a trivial hiatus, an ill-timed caesura? Yet sometimes, conscious of what Mr Logan Pearsall Smith so pleasantly calls 'the divine Ipseity,' I, for one, revel in the sublime conceit that even we, with our poetry and our pedantry, our limited vision and our infinite hungers, are symbols profoundly significant: phrases in a sentence that has meaning, or letters in the word that is the secret of life. And it is this conceit, or something like it, that Mr Chesterton holds as his dearest conviction.

V SUMMARY OF OMISSIONS

EVEN in a study so brief and partial as this one, which must inevitably suffer from all the inadequacies of a personal impression, some mention must be made of other aspects of the subject. I have dealt, however summarily, with the essayist, with the controversialist, with the novelist : there remain to be considered the poet and the literary critic. I say nothing about Mr Chesterton's excursions into history, for he makes no pretence to special historical scholarship, and however little he claims to know of history I am confident of knowing less. But all who love eloquent and spirited prose will be glad that no fatal diffidence intervened to prevent his writing *The Crimes of England*, with its almost lyrical last chapter. The literary criticism is more important. Criticism of criticism is an activity rather too remote from life for an able-bodied

journalist to engage in: it is sufficient to state that Mr Chesterton's books on Dickens, on Browning, on Shaw, and on the Victorian Age in Literature, are books brilliant, in a double sense, and to offer a little random evidence for the statement. They have the personal brilliance (with the personal perverseness) of all his writing, and they have a brilliance that illuminates their several themes. Teeming with entertaining irrelevance, bursting with the author's irrepressible personality, they yet contain sudden and unexpected flashes of critical insight that are of extraordinary value. Chesterton the critic displays his peculiar power of delivering sober judgments in the form of startling jokes. Many of these judgments, and the jokes that embody them, are by now well known. ' But while Emily Bronte was as unsociable as a storm at midnight, and while Charlotte Bronte was at best like that warmer and more domestic thing, a house on fire '—he says this kind of thing

casually, in a mere subordinate sentence. 'Mr Hardy is anthropomorphic out of sheer atheism. He personifies the universe in order to give it a piece of his mind. But the fight is unequal for the old philosophical reason: that the universe had already given Mr Hardy a piece of *its* mind.' And of course there is the passage, which has given (not unnaturally) so much offence, in which Hardy is described as 'a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot.' It is indeed unfortunate that he found nothing new or illuminating to say about this mightiest creative spirit among living Englishmen. His failure to appreciate Hardy is due less to temperament than to temper. He cannot do full justice, honestly though he tries, to a man whose philosophy is so alien, so hostile, to his own.

Finest of all his critical studies is the book on Dickens, whom he loves with rare understanding. The chapter on Pickwick is sheer joy. The Robert Browning

book, too, though a little more sober, is a spirited piece of work in which that fine but troublesome poet receives rather more attention than Chesterton is in the habit of bestowing on his literary sitters. Here, surely, is a stroke of good criticism, which illustrates, incidentally, Chesterton's great gift of making even the obvious arresting by his mere manner of stating it. For it can hardly be too often insisted that a wholesome and democratic love of the obvious is central in his character, and that even his platitudes have the habit of bursting upon us with the starry brilliance of an epigram. This is the passage :

> It may be noticed that Browning was not in the least content with the fact that certain human frailties had always lain more or less under an implied indulgence ; that all human sentiment had agreed that a profligate might be generous, or that a drunkard might be high-minded. He was insatiable : he wished to go further and show in a character like Djabal that an imposter might be generous and that a liar might be high-minded. In all his life, it must constantly be remembered, he tried always the most difficult things. Just as he tried the queerest

> metres and attempted to manage them, so he tried the queerest human souls and attempted to stand in their place. Charity was his basic philosophy; but it was, as it were, a fierce charity, a charity that went man-hunting. He was a kind of cosmic detective who walked into the foulest of thieves' kitchens and accused men publicly of virtue.

This does, I believe, point accurately, as well as wittily, to the most valuable trait in the character of Browning. This godlike charity, not the breezy and beefy buoyancy that pulpiteers love to advertise, was his noblest spiritual quality. It was a spiritual quality that is also an intellectual one, for charity of vision is only clarity of intellect translated into terms of sentiment. *The Ring and the Book* marks, perhaps, its zenith in literature. And what could be more apt than the remark, 'The same sense of the uproarious force in things which makes Browning dwell on the oddity of a fungus or a jellyfish makes him dwell on the oddity of a philosophical idea'? Characteristic, too, is the statement that

Browning's love poetry is the finest love poetry in the world, ' because it does not talk about raptures and ideals and gates of heaven, but about window-panes and gloves and garden-walls.' Here we see the danger, for the unwary, of this highly personal method of criticism, the danger that we may be persuaded to swallow extravagant verdicts in our haste to make a meal of the reasons offered in their support. Mr Chesterton understands as well as any man, and better than most, the psychology of romantic love : that is, perhaps, his one advantage over the adversary with whom he is always linked in the popular imagination, Mr Bernard Shaw. One of the most valuable of the themes that recur, like musical motifs, throughout his writing, is this recognition of the power of romantic emotion to invest sticks and stones, lamp posts and gas meters, a particular house in Hoxton or a particular lane in Bucks, with ' a meaning beyond the power of any dictionary to utter

and a value beyond the power of any millionaire to compute.' The most human page in *The Ball and the Cross* is the one in which, during a motor ride, the mystic MacIan is described as finding an unspeakable joy, an intoxicating significance, in the shape of the hat and the texture of the coat as well as in the personal beauty of the girl with whom he has fallen in love. But we may recognise the truth in the argument, without assenting to the verdict harnessed to it in the passage quoted about Browning. Browning's love poetry may have, indeed has, the virtue Mr Chesterton sees in it, but there remains in the mind the obstinate conviction that it is not, after all, the ' best in the world.' Perhaps Shakespeare, perhaps Sappho, may claim to have done better—but indeed the superlative method in criticism is one that even the most reckless had better avoid.

It may be worth remarking, even though the remark be a digression, that both Mr

Chesterton's democratic instinct and his spirit of evangelism are borne witness to by a third fact, which no student can have failed to notice. It has already been mentioned here. No one in his senses would call Mr Chesterton timid ; many have called him courageous. But it is surely in his habit of shamelessly repeating his favourite doctrines, and even his favourite epigrams, that his courage shines most clear. I have given one example, in speaking of the power of emotion to transform common objects as one of his recurring themes. Another valuable notion, which occurs more than once, is the moral truth he finds in the old fable, ' Beauty and the Beast.' We have met the idea already, in *Orthodoxy*, and the passage there, written in the summer of his fame, is an undoubted echo from one of the newspaper articles that appeared in his first years of journalism. In the old fable, he says, there is written, with all the authority of a human scripture, the eternal truth that until we

love a thing in its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful.

> Modern London is indeed a beast, big enough and black enough to be the beast in Apocalypse, blazing with a million eyes, and roaring with a million voices. But unless the poet can love this fabulous monster as he is, can feel with some generous excitement his massive and mysterious 'joie-de-vivre,' the vast scale of his iron anatomy and the beating of his thunderous heart, he cannot and will not change the beast into the fairy prince.

This you will find, if you are lucky enough to find the book, in *Twelve Types*, a little volume, almost forgotten, which contains, like all first volumes of brilliant men, some of the most excited and exciting of Chesterton's gestures. For the most part they are gestures of contempt, of wrath, or of repudiation, rather than contributions to literary criticism, but that is no cause for complaint in a world where there is already too much literary criticism. The paper on 'Tolstoy and the Cult of Simplicity' is especially interesting, although

there is precious little of Tolstoy in it. That little is indeed precious, for it includes the most frantic attack on frantic Puritanism that modern journalism can boast. Tolstoy, we are told, would not be content with hurling satire and denunciation at 'Solomon in all his glory': he 'would spend days and nights in the meadows stripping the shameless crimson coronals off the lilies of the field.' The real moral of Tolstoy, the great unconscious moral that lies at the heart of all his work, is something of which, in Chesterton's opinion, Tolstoy the moralist would probably disapprove. The curious cold white light of morning, the folklore simplicity, the love for the qualities of concrete things, 'the ingrained belief in a certain ancient kindliness sitting beside the very cradle of the race of man'—these influences, says Chesterton, are truly moral.

> When we put beside them the trumpeting and tearing nonsense of the didactic Tolstoy, screaming for an obscene purity, shouting for

> an inhuman peace, hacking up human life into small sins with a chopper, sneering at men, women, and children out of respect to humanity, combining in one chaos of contradictions an unmanly Puritan and an uncivilised prig, then, indeed, we scarcely know whither Tolstoy has vanished. We know not what to do with this small and noisy moralist who is inhabiting one corner of a great and good man.

Evidently refreshed by this outburst our author proceeds to a more sober discussion of the simplicity cult, which he pulverises at one blow by pointing out that simplicity is valueless as soon as it ceases to be spontaneous, as soon as it becomes self-conscious. The criticism of Tolstoyan Christianity is equally diverting, if less sound. When Christians fall out it is not for a mere outsider to intervene, but I permit myself to suggest, with all due diffidence, that Chesterton's argument against Tolstoyan ethics is vitiated by his entertaining notion, for which there seems to be scanty evidence, that Jesus Christ anticipated all the opinions of G. K. Chesterton. This suspicion will dawn on any

reader of any Chesterton argument in which the nominal founder of Christianity figures. However that may be there is a lot of horse sense in his derision of the talk about 'loving humanity' in which so many Christians, Tolstoyan and otherwise, delight to indulge. 'Christ did not love humanity; He never said He loved humanity; He loved men.' This is a quibble, for the word 'humanity,' in the sense used by those who aspire to be its lovers, means men, all men, or, to be pedantic, all men, women, and children. The author goes on to say:

> Neither He nor anyone else can love humanity; it is like loving a gigantic centipede. And the reason that the Tolstoians can even endure to think of an equally distributed affection is that their love of humanity is a logical love into which they are coerced by their own theories, a love which would be an insult to a tom-cat.

These citations from *Twelve Types* have a peculiar interest for the student of Chesterton, who will notice that though that author

has improved and amplified the substance of his discourse, his philosophy has not changed during all his twenty-three years of public life. He will notice further that the voice and tone of the twenty-five year old are the same as those of the mature writer that he has become. Stylistic differences there are, between the passage I am about to quote and any similar passage in *Orthodoxy*, which came seven years later, or any similar passage Mr Chesterton may write to-morrow, twenty years later: they exist, though they are minute, and they are not entirely in favour of the older man. The style of his first period has a freshness, a spontaneity, which the later work sometimes seems to lack. It is as if the manner had hardened into mannerism, as if the happy flow of paradox and antithesis had stiffened into a pattern, with a result which, though it can never be justly called laboured, must in justice be sometimes called mechanical. This is his final comment on those singular Christians who wish

to do what Christ told them to do, and it is none the worse, one feels, for being a little less coruscating, a little less loaded with the peculiar Chestertonian ore, than the same comment would be if it were made in the style of his maturity :

> But the greatest error of all lies in the mere act of cutting up the teaching of the New Testament into five rules. It precisely and ingeniously misses the most dominant characteristic of the teaching—its absolute spontaneity. The abyss between Christ and all His modern interpreters is that we have no record that He ever wrote a word, except with His finger in the sand. The whole is the history of one continuous and sublime conversation. Thousands of rules have been deduced from it before these Tolstoian rules were made, and thousands will be deduced afterwards. It was not for any pompous proclamation, it was not for any elaborate output of printed volumes ; it was for a few splendid and idle words that the cross was set up on Calvary, and the earth gaped, and the sun was darkened at noonday.

It is evident that, so far as the mere technical art of making sentences is concerned, Mr Chesterton learnt his trade very

thoroughly before he began to ply it: how and where is no matter for profitable conjecture. We need not suppose him to have been born with a silver epigram in his mouth, with which to bewilder the wits and evoke the admiration of his delighted nurse; we need not try to compute the number of his manuscripts that served only as literary exercises, for they have not survived. The fact that confronts us is that when, at the beginning of this century, he entered the lists of journalism, he brought with him a weapon of his own forging, a weapon that he has never ceased to use with honour and effect.

Our glance at the literary criticism has been perfunctory indeed: at the poems we must look a little more closely. And yet I believe that we shall find little more than that the poems have the good qualities of the prose, and some of its defects: the gay colours and hard outlines of a mediæval missal, alliteration, antithesis, rhetoric, and a touch of rant. In brief, the first thing

we shall notice about the poems is that they were written by G. K. Chesterton, the man who always prefers bright colours to delicate shades. No one else could have written them. He is a solitary voice in modern poetry, and it is therefore fitting that he should be a loud one. To him belongs the honour of having revived the ancient trade of minstrelsy, though for the moment it appears likely to remain a one-man revival. And his solitariness increases rather than diminishes the difficulty of criticism, especially if it be deemed the duty of criticism to compare him, as a poet, with his contemporaries. Is he better than this man, or as good as that? Is beer better than Burgundy? Is whisky better than rum? The philosophical answer to these heart-searching questions is reverent agnosticism, Tennyson's favourite emotion. Is Chesterton the poet better or worse than Ferdinand Flank, that master of metres? To that the sound critical answer is: Neither better nor worse, but

different. But at least we can say this: that Chesterton's poetic Muse is more full-throated than is fashionable, and that beauty means to him rather brighter colours, rather lustier laughter, rather more substantial meals than we are accustomed to find inspiration in. His is the poetry of enthusiasm, not of ecstasy; his song is lusty, not lyrical; his emotions are eager but not intense; his verse is invigorating, never exquisite. It is as if the old coarse, crude, and splendid balladry had been refined and elaborated, transmuted into a new thing, by filtration through the mind of a man of letters. So much for generalities. When we look for more particular qualities we find, chief among them, a noble militancy. They are his finest poems in which this note rings most clear. This essay will not be useless if it succeeds only in establishing it, as an indisputable truth, that Chesterton is not a man of levity but a man of battle. He is also a man of religion who conceives it his joy and his

duty to bring the religious test to every problem of life: that is why democracy is with him a religious as well as a political conviction. He does not live, as do those to whom Christianity is a mere fashion or fad, in separate compartments, sacred and secular. For him laughter is as holy as prayer, and prayer as spontaneous as laughter. For him, I imagine, a sunset is as satisfying as a drink; for him, I am confident, a drink is as lovely as a sunset. Knowing the value of ale, he will not resent my remarking that to compare his poetry with more exquisite music would be as incongruous as comparing a good brew with a rare and old vintage. The one makes one glad, but the other makes one glow. The one is exuberance, the other is ecstasy. There is poetry that floods the inward eye with a beauty so intense as to be scarcely distinguishable from a kind of pain; it makes the mind tingle, as wine does; it makes the heart dream, as opium does. There is a poetry that has rather the

wholesome ring of a challenge ; it stirs the blood, as martial music will, even though it leave the intellect cold. This latter is the poetry of G. K. Chesterton. Beer it is, but no one can say that it is small beer.

But indeed this praise seems faint enough to those who have in some sense shared, by reading his poems, the innocent visions of this great-hearted visionary. Not for nothing has he the personal appearance of a wise baby, for both wisdom and innocence are conspicuous in his utterances. One cannot doubt that he has subconsciously put something of himself both into Father Brown, the mild and shrewd little Roman Catholic priest, repository of a thousand stories of sin, and into Innocent Smith who, if one may put it so, maketh all things new. Constantly, in these poems, the note of elemental wonder startles one into a sense of living in the beginning of creation, the first day. There shines through them, in a word or in a line, a kind of cold

primæval dawn in whose grey light familiar shapes of men and beast move like queer monsters of the mind. 'Our towns were shaken of tall kings with scarlet beards like blood'—the very violence of the simile, which is like a blow in the face, gets just the required effect of bleak desolation, of strange terror, and of remoteness.

> Misshapen ships stood on the deep
> Full of strange gold and fire,
> And hairy men as huge as sin,
> With horned heads, came wading in
> Through the long, low sea-mire.*

If militancy is most obvious, elemental innocence of vision is greatest, among the dominant qualities of this poetry. It is the spirit that sees life, and tries to see philosophy, under concrete symbols, a contest between definite colours, a battle between solid bodies, a duel between God and Satan with Man as the fickle ally now of one, now of the other. Inevitably the symbolism, in the hands of the literal-minded, loses its

* From *The Ballad of the White Horse* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

essential quality: the symbols become superstitions. The cross becomes a fetish, displacing the crucifixion instead of symbolising it; the image of the god is worshipped in place of the god itself: here is the history of idolatry in epitome. At the name of Shakespeare every knee shall bow: it is so much less trouble than reading his works. At the word 'marriage' we turn up the eyes with unction, for it is infinitely easier to be married than to be moral. The gods are dethroned by idols, the idols are dethroned by new gods, which themselves become idols in their turn: there is no end to the dismal cycle of futility. Visions are degraded into fashions; idealism becomes idolatry; the letter liveth and sucks into its dry bones the worship due to the departed spirit. Where there is no vision the people perish, but the creeds remain: this is the eternal justification of great iconoclasts like Bernard Shaw, whose *Quintessence of Ibsenism* Mr Chesterton fails to appreciate—although he, too,

has done his share of idol-smashing. If we convince a simple-minded engine-driver that the danger signal is a goblin swollen red with the blood of luckless engine-drivers who dared to approach it, we may effect our immediate purpose, but we shall also inspire him with an unhealthy fear of the doctor's red lamp. This is the danger of presenting symbols as facts. But Mr Chesterton is not an engine-driver (so far as I know), and his way of thinking is of considerable literary value to us. In his poems, as in his best prose, he achieves that hardness and that clarity which the Imagists preached, and which some of them even practised now and again. There is an arresting stanza which perfectly illustrates this statement :

> Great wine like blood from Burgundy,
> Cloaks like the clouds from Tyre,
> And marble like solid moonlight,
> And gold like frozen fire.*

Elsewhere in the same poem he says of King Alfred,

* From *The Ballad of the White Horse* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

> All things sprang at him, sun and weed,
> Till the grass grew to be grass indeed
> And the tree was a tree at last.*

And we feel that to the poet himself the grass is greener, and the trees taller and more vivid, than the grass and the trees we know; that (inverting his own similes) for him moonlight is as solid as marble and yet as bright as noon sunshine, that for him fire manages somehow to be as hard as gold and yet remain as hot as hell. And he has the strength as well as the simplicity of the elemental vision, for indeed this intensification of all things is the exaggeration of strength, not of weakness straining itself. He fills the cup of the universe with colour until the cup runs over and the spilth fills his page with light. He sees double, not in duplicate like drunken man, but double in size: it is as if he cannot paint the sky blue enough, and that, however high the breakers of the sea rise he will have them rise still higher. The result is gaudy and not neat; and all who

* From *The Ballad of the White Horse* (Methuen) by permission of the publishers.

lust after precision, rationality, sobriety, and the conversational tone in poetry had best avoid it. He exults in vast imagery and in strong nervous rhythms, and of both he has an adequate command. In the poem from which I have already quoted, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, he chose a subject that he alone (among moderns) was fitted to treat of, and he chose for it a form that he uses with conspicuous skill. The conventional ballad metres provide him with just the tempo suited to his peculiar methods.

Eleven years later came *The Ballad of Saint Barbara*. Saint Barbara is the patron saint of artillery and of those in danger of sudden death, and her story is told, amid the sound and fury of war, by a Breton soldier to a Norman during the Battle of the Marne. The poem is excellent in its kind. It is not wonderfully good poetry, but it is wonderfully good Chesterton.

> Gaul, charioted and charging, great Gaul upon
> a gun,
> Tip-toe on all her thousand years and trumpet
> ing to the sun:

Is not that rousing stuff? But let me quote the context:

> For the hand is raised behind us, and the bolt smites hard
> Through the rending of the doorways, through the death-gap of the Guard,
> For the cry of the Three Colours is in Condé and beyond
> And the guard is flung for carrion in the grave-yard of St Gond,
> Through Mondemont and out of it, through Morin marsh and on
> With earthquake of salutation the impossible thing is gone,
> Gaul, charioted and charging, great Gaul upon a gun,
> Tip-toe on all her thousand years and trumpeting to the sun:
> As day returns, as death returns, swung backwards and swung home,
> Back on the barbarous reign returns the battering-ram of Rome.

Again and again the story is cut short by the battle, which surges round it like a wild sea encircling, sometimes flooding, a white peak of rock. Here, too, is a vivid contrast of colour: the red carnage, the black belching guns, and intervening, like the

sweet remote music of some archaic instrument, the old legend, blue with the blue of all celestial things, green with the sap of young leaves. And the contrast in colours (never, of course, stated) is reflected in a contrast in measure: the short flexible ballad metre, with its great potential variety of syllable, and its basis of stress:

> Barbara the beautiful
> Had praise of lute and pen:
> Her hair was like a summer night
> Dark and desired of men.
>
> Her feet like birds from far away
> That linger and light in doubt;
> And her face was like a window
> Where a man's first love looked out.

—and the long rolling lines, like the long lines of French cavalry that poured out of Paris to flood the plain with their victory:

> They are burst asunder in the midst that eat of their own flatteries,
> Whose lip is curled to order as its barbered hair is curled. . . .
>
> Blast of the beauty of sudden death, St Barbara of the batteries!
> That blow the new white window in the wall of all the world.

Enough has been said to prove that whatever else Mr Chesterton may be, he is not a minor poet. He has escaped the charge of being a minor novelist, by not writing novels. ('I cannot in conscience call them novels,' he has said, 'but at least they are narratives.') He escapes the charge of being a minor poet by writing poetry that is at least his own. And the verse of his lighter moods is undeniably some of the best in its excellent kind that we have. More than half the delight of comic poetry consists in the incongruity between substance and style. The style is dignified, sometimes to the point of being pompous; the substance is often the airiest flippancy. This is one kind of light verse, which more than one great poet has now and again achieved in spite of himself by an accidental lapse into bathos. I omit obvious examples from Wordsworth. But there is also another kind, practised by Mr Belloc, Mr Chesterton, and some others, to which a new thrill is afforded to the

reader by the occasional, and generally unexpected, use of slang. The more colloquial is the idiom, the more dramatic is the anti-climax from affected pomp to a kind of hearty and humorous vulgarity; the further the fall, the more exhilarating the bump. This is half the secret of Cockney humour, the other half being a trick of irony that has almost lost its savour, so familiar has it become.

> It would greatly, I must own,
> Soothe me, Smith,
> If you left this theme alone,
> Holy Smith!
> For your legal cause or civil
> You fight well and get your fee;
> For your God or dream or devil
> You will answer not to me.
> Talk about the pews and steeples
> And the cash that goes therewith!
> But the souls of Christian peoples . . .
> —Chuck it, Smith!

That 'Chuck it!' is precisely the retort that a London cabby would make to any piece of brag or humbug. And one is reminded that Mr Chesterton, too, boasts

the proud title of Cockney. You see the same method in the lines about the Shakespeare Memorial.

> Lord Lilac thought it rather rotten
> That Shakespeare should be quite forgotten—

this is sheer realism, the idiom of modern aristocracy. But to get the most effect out of slang one must have contrast :

> And while the vain world careless sped
> Unheeding the heroic name—
> The souls most fed with Shakespeare's flame
> Still sat unconquered in a ring,
> Remembering him like anything.

Even in *The New Freethinker*, which may seem at first glance uniformly prosaic, there is this occasional contrast, this comic shock :

> John Grubby, who was short and stout
> And troubled with religious doubt,
> Refused about the age of three
> To sit upon the curate's knee ;
> (For so the eternal strife must rage
> Between the spirit of the age
> And Dogma, which, as is well known,
> Does simply hate to be outgrown).

And close on the heels of this humorously prosaic but not specially colloquial passage comes this couplet :

> Grubby, the young idea that shoots,
> Outgrew the ages like old boots.

Never were old boots more beatific, or put to a more holy purpose, than in this poem. The same method, the Cockney method, is apparent in some of the infinitely diverting *Ballades*. The one on Suicide is perhaps rather in the older style of sustained mock-seriousness :

> The gallows in my garden, people say,
> Is new and neat and adequately tall.
> I tie the noose on in a knowing way
> As one that knots his necktie for a ball ;
> But just as all the neighbours—on the wall—
> Are drawing a long breath to shout ' Hurray ! '
> The strangest whim has seized me. . . . After all
> I think I will not hang myself to-day.

But this *Ballade of an Anti-Puritan* has more of Hoxton in it and less of Harrow. It is a kind of symphony, having for its

sublime and dominant theme the single and potent word 'pub':

> They spoke of Progress spiring round,
> Of Light and Mrs Humphrey Ward—
> It is not true to say I frowned,
> Or ran about the room and roared;
> I might have simply sat and snored—
> I rose politely in the club
> And said, 'I feel a little bored;
> Will someone take me to a pub?'
>
> The new world's wisest did surround
> Me; and it pains me to record
> I did not think their views profound
> Or their conclusions well assured;
> The simple life I can't afford,
> Besides, I do not like the grub—
> I want a mash and sausage, 'scored'—
> Will someone take me to a pub?

I shall conclude this inadequate summary of my own omissions with an account of the one play that Mr Chesterton has written. And first of all it should be noted that the one word of its title expresses the essential singularity of his philosophy. I think it might also be said that his prominence in modern life is due largely to his solitariness,

and that his solitariness consists in this: that he is the only man of distinguished intelligence in England who believes—without metaphor or affectation—in magic. Only a negligible handful of rationalists, whom Mr Chesterton is perpetually pelting with scorn, deny that life is full of wonder, magical in the loose, inaccurate sense of mysterious. Most intelligent men are content to say that things happen of which we have no explanation, and other things of which we have no knowledge: they say that some phenomena are at present inexplicable, and that some others will in all human probability remain inexplicable for all eternity. Mr Chesterton alone pretends, in a sense, to some knowledge of the unknown; he alone has, in some sense, a formula by which to account for the unknowable. His answer is one that silences the question without satisfying that questioner. He alone believes in sheer magic, which I take to be the same as saying that he alone believes that both God and the

Devil are in the habit of indulging in direct action. It is in this sense that he believes in miracles, not in the sense in which nearly everyone else believes in them, which is that all natural processes are miraculous in that they are incomprehensible. When Mr Bernard Shaw talks about miracles, he is talking poetry : when Mr Chesterton talks about them he is talking philosophy. The arresting thing (for me, at least) about this assumption, that there is such a thing as sheer magic, is its unnecessariness. It is a pure assumption, there being no logical reason for it, and it differs from many other pure assumptions in that one can get on quite well without it. We can get along quite well on the supposition that ' nature ' is a convenient word that expresses, at most, the limits of our knowledge of the way life works. I say ' knowledge,' not ' understanding ' ; for such phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, and so on, cease to seem ' supernatural ' (though they remain

wonderful) as soon as it is admitted that they happen. It is true that we do not know how they happen ; but then many of us (I for one) do not know how digestion happens, and we should not cease to marvel at it even if we did. Admittedly, if one believes in a cosmic purpose one must believe in a cosmic will ; and here indeed is the crux of the whole controversy. I was wrong in trying to distinguish between the miracles of Shaw's belief, and those of Chesterton's : they are the same to the extent that both for Shaw and for Chesterton a miracle is not merely ' wonderful but wilful.' In the one philosophy all life is conceived as being one continuous activity of the Life Force, a series of experiments : in the other the miracle is a direct act of God or Devil without human or material agency. The one postulates a Cosmic Will, of which all human lives are the expression and of which all human wills are the aggregate parts. The other asserts that every god and every demon, every man, woman

and child, is a kind of cosmos in itself, possessing an entirely separate personality and an entirely independent will. The difference, stated shortly, is the difference between monism and dualism—or, more literally, between monism and multi-millionism.

Magic is set in the house of a duke (unnamed) who embodies in himself all the good intentions and intellectual vacuity of those who mistake absence of conviction for liberality of mind. The caricature is a shade too crude even for the cruder convention of the theatre. This duke subscribes equal sums to a fund for setting up a model public-house, and to the league that opposes the project; to the Militant Vegetarians, and to the Anti-Vegetarians; and he makes a donation to the Society for the Suppression of Conjurers on the very evening on which he employs a conjurer to amuse his own company. He is all for those 'aspects' of truth which Chesterton so heartily despises. 'In the present

state of the peerage,' we are told in the stage directions, ' it is necessary to explain that the Duke, though an ass, is a gentleman.' This gentlemanly ass possesses a niece, Patricia Carleon, who has a profound belief in fairies and the habit of walking alone in the twilight. In the garden, during one of her reveries, she encounters a hooded stranger who talks to her in ' the language of the elves ' and performs miracles. Later he turns out to be none other than the conjurer engaged for the evening. The occasion is of some importance to the family ; for it is the evening of the return from America of Patricia's brother, Morris Carleon. This boy, whose Irishry has been covered with a veneer of bad American manners, contrives to quarrel with the conjurer. The latter is more than his match in wit, and adds fuel to the fire by scoring off him heavily throughout their conversation, which chiefly concerns conjuring. The quarrel culminates in a series of challenges. It has been tactfully

side-tracked for a while by an argument about miracles in which both the doctor and the rector join.

> MORRIS. You say old man Reynolds lived; and Science don't say no. [*He turns excitedly to the picture.*] But I guess he's dead now; and you'll no more raise your Saints and Prophets from the dead than you'll raise the Duke's great-grandfather to dance on that wall.
>
> [*The picture begins to sway slightly to and fro on the wall.*]

At this Morris is mastered by the angry excitement that has been rising in him during the whole dispute. He taunts the conjurer, with a high crowing laugh. 'You can do all that with wires.' The conjurer admits that he could. 'That's how the derned dirty Spiritualists do all their tricks. They say they can make the furniture move of itself. If it does move they move it; and we mean to know how.' A chair falls over with a slight crash. But even that, though he is shaken, Morris explains with a theory about sliding planks. And

then comes the great moment. Morris turns for aid to the doctor's red lamp, which is visible through the window :

> MORRIS. You were right on the spot, Doc, when you talked about that red lamp of yours. That red lamp is the light of science that will put out all the lanterns of your turnip ghosts. It's a consuming fire, Doctor, but it is the red light of the morning. [*Points at it in exalted enthusiasm.*] Your priests can no more stop that light from shining or change its colour and its radiance than Joshua could stop the sun and moon. [*Laughs savagely.*] Why, a real fairy in an elfin cloak strayed too near the lamp an hour or two ago ; and it turned him into a common society clown with a white tie.

Whereupon the lamp at the end of the garden turns blue. They all look at it in silence. It is really a fine piece of sensationalism, for by this time has dawned upon us the significance of the title. This is magic, and already, in our subconsciousness, we know it. Its immediate effect on Morris is to make him succumb to the family mental weakness, from which he is rescued finally by the conjurer himself,

who, to save the boy's reason, invents a natural explanation of a trick that was, in fact, no trick at all, but a miracle. For the conjurer had in the past dabbled in Spiritualism and thereby had had contact with devils; and now, stung to anger by the boy's taunts, he had soiled himself by a second contact. Although it has faults, *Magic* is a good piece of drama, full of crisp dialogue that is all to the point, and provided with some pretty curtains. Mr Chesterton has written no other play, presumably because he has said here what he most wants to say, and the only thing he could say in a manner suitable for representation on the stage. Like everything else that he has written, and like the sketches with which he has enlivened some of his own and other people's books, it expresses what he is always expressing, and what is so very well worth expressing —himself.

I have said that Mr Chesterton loves,

with an equal zest, feasting and fighting, and I am constrained to wonder what he will find to do if the dawn ever rises on a fairer world than this, a world in which righteousness and peace have kissed one another and all is beer and skittles. Skittles, I am confident, will never suffice for a man in whom rages the fire of an eternal thirst for the wine of holy warfare. Perhaps there will be a demon or two admitted into the company of the blessed, if only to provide him with bodily exercise —for the idea of Mr Chesterton as a disembodied spirit is too ridiculous to be entertained. I began with a vision of this joyous crusader riding a-tilt against all the forces of infidelity, and I find it hard to end with a vision of his lance eternally at rest. Perhaps, if no other demons avail, I myself may be permitted to visit him, from my hole among the damned, to continue the quarrels begun in this book. Certainly his presence among the more pallid but not more pious Christians would

make Paradise worth a visit. I take pleasure in picturing to myself that dim, far off, divine event. Some sort of feast, I fancy, will precede the fight. In a hospitality that makes no distinction of persons Mr Chesterton will greet even me, the least of his critics but not the least ardent of his admirers, with a shout of welcome fit to shake the stars from their courses and make all the angels of heaven clap hands to their ears. He will grasp my arm and rush me along the golden pavements of Paradise—past the Headquarters of the Purity League past the Amalgamated Bands of Hope—to that little Tavern at the World's End which is one of his happiest fancies. And there, drinking together from miraculous ever-brimming tankards, we shall listen for the nymph-tread of the night, and watch the sun spill, with a last kingly gesture, his molten colours at her feet.

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